

A Journey in Song

GRACE FINDS WINGS

JILL MILLER



Carpenter's Son Publishing

Grace Finds Wings: A Journey In Song

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This book would not have been possible without the love and support of many wonderful people in my life.

First, I would like to thank my husband, John. It's hard to find the words to say to you. Your unwavering support and belief in me and this ministry humbles me beyond words. You have done more for my self-esteem than a lifetime of therapy ever could! Thank you for always pushing me forward, for never letting me quit (even when I wanted to so badly!), and for believing in this crazy journey that we've been on. Most men would have told their wives to pack it in a long time ago, but you kept your eyes on the goal: reaching others for Christ. You have never lost sight of that goal, and I love you so much for that and a million other things that make you you!

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My heavenly Father, thank you for loving me in spite of all my imperfections and flaws. Thank you for speaking to me through your Word or through words I know you placed in other people's minds to encourage me at just the right moment. I love where you have taken me on this journey thus far, and I look forward to all that you're going to accomplish with this book. I pray readers will be able to see a glimpse of your love in these pages.

Prelude

As I sit down at my computer to start this book, I'm overwhelmed by this thought: *Who am I to think that I can write a book? What in the world do I have to say?* Yet here I sit because I have heard God's prompting for a number of years now, and that can no longer be ignored! My excuses and all the reasons I *can't* or *shouldn't* write a book have run out, and it's time to take action. It's time to be obedient to that prompting and pushing I feel from the Holy Spirit, instead of taking my typical stance of pretending I don't hear it. I've been hearing it loud and clear but choosing to ignore it because I have allowed my insecurities and feelings of inadequacy to silence it and push it to the side.

Please understand that I'm not writing this because I feel I have much wisdom or incredible faith. I doubt myself and my faithfulness all the time, just as most of us do. However, I write because I know I have a story that God wants me to share. We all have our own stories, our individual journeys; yet for some reason, I am convinced God wants me to put some of my story down on paper in the hope that my witness might somehow reach others on their journeys and give them hope when they feel hopeless. If that happens, and even one person is touched, this will all be worth it!

As I've shared parts of my story over the years in my concerts and at women's retreats, I've been struck by the fact that, though our stories are all so different and unique, there are some common threads in all of them. We all struggle, we all weep, we all have moments of intense joy and seasons of incredible pain. We all face disappointments. And we all just want to know that something in our lives has mattered or made a difference in this world. We want to know there has been meaning and a purpose to our lives. We need to know we

are not alone on our journeys.

Often I am asked about the stories behind my songs. Is it something I went through or something someone else did? How much of this song is true? How much is made up? So, here is the journey, if you will, that we will take through this book: I am going to take the songs from my latest CD, *Grace Finds Wings*, and go through them one at a time and give you the story behind each. Some of the stories are personal to me, some are other people's stories, and some are things that were simply on my heart when I wrote the song. Songs come from many different places, and I am excited about sharing the stories behind these songs.

If you study the butterfly that you see on the front of this book, you will notice that its wings are a little tattered. The top left wing has a tear in it. The top right wing has a piece missing. The bottom wings have imperfections as well. We could have fixed the wings through the magic of Photoshop. They could have been perfect, but I wanted the wings to remain that way, tattered and worn, full of imperfections. Exactly like all of us. Sometimes life destroys a little piece of our wings, and we carry those scars with us. But I firmly believe that those scars and the imperfections of our lives are what make us beautiful, unique creations. This book is my attempt to share some of my imperfections—some of the bites, if you will, that life has taken out of my wings. Because, in the end, in spite of the tattered wings, this butterfly will fly. It will soar through the heavens, imperfections and all.

Thank you for indulging me and opening the pages of this humble offering. My earnest prayer and heart's desire is that the Holy Spirit will be at work through these pages and that you will be encouraged and inspired to take another step on your journey.

I also hope we get a chance to meet somewhere along our journeys so I can hear your story as well!



Investing in Eternity



Words and Music by Jill Miller

*Greed is a thirst I will never quench
When every last dime I have is spent
I'll still be thirsty, always wanting more
Yeah, I've been there before*

*No matter what it's never quite enough
To get to the top of this broken cup
Money runs out and the well runs dry
And I'm never satisfied*

*Let me lay my treasure down, put my riches on your crown
Grace is where true fortune is found
Money's had its hold on me, but here and now I'm breaking free
I've got to find a better me
I'll live a brand new way because today I'm gonna be
Investing in eternity, investing in eternity*

This ain't Wall Street, running hot and cold

*I am guaranteed to dance on streets of gold
I'll run from the lies this world tries to sell
It's a game of show and tell*

*Let me lay my treasure down, put my riches on your crown
Grace is where true fortune is found
Money's had its hold on me, but here and now I'm breaking free
I've got to find a better me
I'll live a brand new way because today I'm gonna be
Investing in eternity, investing in eternity*

*The more I invest the more I will be blessed
The more I lay down the more treasure to be found
The more I give up the more you fill my cup
The more I lose my life the more I get it right*



When I sat down to write this song, I was in the middle of a financial crisis. My ministry was struggling to get bookings (mainly because I absolutely can't book myself and hadn't figured out that I needed help with that!), and I was spending more money than I was taking in. I was in the middle of starting, in essence, a brand new business as I was touring with Lipstick and Laughs, a trio that I was a part of for three and a half years. One of the members lived in Boston and the other in Nashville, so travel was an essential part of this endeavor and made for a longer-than-normal start-up.

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REHEARSAL TOGETHER!
ALL THE TRAVEL MADE
FOR A LOT OF EXPENSES.

We had to work around the schedules of three busy singer/songwriters, plus we had to travel to work together. Skype became our best friend, but you can't Skype a show or a rehearsal together! All the travel made for a lot of expenses. Plus, the costs of making CDs and doing music for a living are overwhelming at times.

On top of that, my husband owns a retail business that was also struggling at the time, in the midst of a sluggish local economy. Add to that some horrendous medical bills from some health issues I had faced earlier in the year, and it all came together to make for a perfect storm of financial worries. And worry I did! That's one thing I can do quite well, thank you!

I would read Matthew 6:33, 34 over and over: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Great words to live by, and I know they are true, but sometimes, in fact, most of the time, they're incredibly hard to put into practice. I would read those words and give myself a great big pep talk, but worry would somehow stomp to my door and present its ugly head over and over again. It felt as if I was swimming in the middle of the ocean with no land in sight. I just didn't see a way out.

I know I'm not alone in worrying about money and finances. Financial stress is such a huge part of our lives. According to *Business News Daily*:

Worrying about money can affect you in more ways than you may realize. New research has found that the risks of several significant health problems increase when people worry about their financial situation.

While it is not surprising that the main source of stress for most people is money, this new research has found just what people can expect from their worries. In a comparison of people who had a high level of stress over debt and those who did

not, it was found that people with high stress levels were twice as likely to have a heart attack compared with those who did not worry about their financial situation. The poll, conducted by the Associated Press and AOL, also found that:

- **Ulcers or digestive tract problems** — 27 percent of people with high stress over finances reported digestive problems versus 8 percent of people who did not worry about finances.
- **Headaches or migraines** — 44 percent of people financially stressed reported having migraines versus 4 percent of people with low financial stress.
- **Depression** — 23 percent of people with financial stress were depressed, compared with 4 percent of people who were not stressed.
- **Muscle tension or lower back pain** — Highly stressed people were 65 percent more likely to suffer from back pain and muscle tensions than those with low stress.¹

And, according to the *Rodale News*:

A new study suggests that stressing over work and finances is particularly bad for your health. Scientific evidence—not to mention anecdotal evidence from our own experience—has made it all too clear that stress can lead to health problems like weight gain and high blood pressure. A new study published in *Diabetes Care* suggests that some types of stress are more damaging than others and can increase your risk of metabolic syndrome, which is a combination of maladies including increased abdominal fat and insulin resistance. This syndrome can lead to other serious problems, most notably Type 2 diabetes and heart disease.²

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A PEACE THAT WILL DRAW
OTHERS TO CHRIST. HARD TO
DO WHEN YOU'RE LIVING IN
TURMOIL YOURSELF.

Hmmmm. So I guess I'm not alone in this worry about finances. And more importantly, this stress-over-money thing can have serious consequences in our lives both physically and emotionally. Who wants to have a heart attack, ulcer, or depression? Doesn't sound fun to me. On top of that, by calling myself a Christian, I also know that I'm supposed to be different than the rest of the world; I'm supposed to act and think differently and have a peace that will draw others to Christ. Hard to do when you're living in turmoil yourself, and that pressure I felt to have it "all together" only added to my worry.

These thoughts about money and these worries about our finances started taking on a life all their own. They crept into all of my waking thoughts and even started waking me up at night. They were like a pesky little fly that keeps buzzing around your face. You know how it is when you're sitting out on the deck on a beautiful summer afternoon, trying to read a book and enjoy the day. You get all settled in with your cold drink, your book, and a few precious moments of freedom—and then it comes. That one, maniacal little insect that just won't leave you alone! You swat at it and tell it to go away, but it doesn't listen. It just keeps coming back and keeps buzzing and tickling your nose until you feel absolutely crazy. Why won't it go away? This tiny little insect can be incredibly annoying and ruin any chance you have of finding your joy. This is the same thing worry does.

Well, as I sat to write one day, all these thoughts were front and center in my mind. I knew right then and there I had to make some definite changes in my life, and this song was going to be my battle cry to do just that. I started by acknowledging the fact that greed is something wedged deep inside my soul. It's an ugly part of me I would like to get rid of, but it remains a part of my makeup. Different Bible verses began jumping out at me, verses such as Luke 11:39: "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness." Proverbs 28:25 says, "The greedy stir up conflict, but those who trust in the Lord will

prosper.” And Luke 12:15 says, “Then he said to them, ‘Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.’”

These verses spoke loudly and clearly to me and opened my eyes to the ways money had truly become my god. I was worshipping it. No, I wasn’t writing songs about it or bringing sacrifices to place on its altar . . . or was I? I was definitely thinking and acting as if having more of it would bring me happiness and peace. I was putting money at the center of my thoughts. I was hoping and praying for more, more, more! I knew better, as I think we all do, yet I realized I really was worshipping at the altar of materialism, because I continued to place my pursuit of it front and center in my life.

The thing about money and greed is that we never get “there”—wherever “there” is. If we achieve one goal, we next want something better. If we buy one new car, we just want another new one down the road. If our friend has the latest, greatest outfit, we think we need it too. If you’re anything like me, there’s always one more pair of black shoes that we think we need. (OK, I have to admit: I have a little problem with shoes.) Or maybe it’s the absolutely perfect purse we think we need, while we have ten other perfectly good purses on our shelves. And in spite of the way our clothes are smashed together in our closets, we can never find a thing to wear! It’s a never-ending wish list that we keep in our heads. Most of us try to contain ourselves and tell ourselves we don’t care what anybody else is doing or wearing, but so often we live secretly in a very greedy and envious world. At least I know I do.

So I started writing and pouring my heart out. *Greed is a thirst I will never quench, when every last dime I have is spent I’ll still be thirsty, always wanting more, yeah, I’ve been there before.* Here was something I knew was, unfortunately, very true in my life and, I think, in many of our lives. We live in a very materialistic society, and we are under constant attack from commercials and movies touting

the next best thing that we need to purchase, the one thing that will finally bring us true happiness and peace. We've all been caught in that trap and have been disappointed as the thrill of the new purchase quickly wears off. We can spend all we have, overspend what we don't have, and buy things on credit, but there will always be "just one more" thing that promises to give us the satisfaction we all crave.

Investing in Eternity

Where I was when this song came to me: *Sitting at my piano in my music room*

Month, year written: *March 2012*

How long it took me to write: *I am always tweaking, but I probably settled on this version after about two months of reworking it.*

When I just knew I 'had it': *This felt good from the start because I knew the message was so powerful and something that people would relate to. When we were in the studio, this was one of my favorites right away.*

Musical style/inspiration this most closely matches: *I love Adele, and I hoped to match some of the sassiness and drive in her melodies.*

Anything else fun about 'Investing'? *This is the first single we released from the CD. It's getting played at different independent stations across the country, as well as in England and Ireland, which is pretty cool. The band wants to get their passports ready and do a tour in Ireland!*

No matter what it's never quite enough to get to the top of this broken cup. Money runs out and the well runs dry, and I'm never satisfied. The thirst for money is truly insatiable. There's no satisfying it. I remember hearing a very troubling quote by billionaire businessman and aviator Howard Hughes. When asked how much money would be enough, one of the richest men in the world said, "Just a little bit more." Isn't that sad to think that, even at his level of success, he was always striving for more money? Nothing was ever going to be enough.

I realize part of the problem for me is my extremely competitive nature. Being competitive is great for sports, but it can be a liability in everyday life. It's hard to see your neighbor come home with a brand new car and not feel a tug that you deserve one too! It's hard to see people update their houses and not feel as if yours needs a few changes, too. It's hard to hear about the wonderful trips your friends and coworkers are going on when you can't afford to travel. We all quite easily fall into that competitive trap, which only ends up making us feel empty.

Let me lay my treasure down, put my riches on your crown. In Matthew 6:19-21 Jesus teaches us about money when he says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Jesus doesn't pull any punches, but calls it as it is: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." He makes it pretty clear that if we make money and wealth our treasure, our hearts are going to follow. The true treasure in life is found in Jesus Christ and His free gift of salvation. When I keep that truth foremost in my thoughts, the things of this world quickly become trivial and meaningless. We all know that "You can't take it with you," but so often we act as if we can when we put currency before eternity,

we sacrifice charity for our own prosperity, and we put our personal greed before the overall need. (Hey, maybe I can become a rapper!)

As I delved into this passage further and read some of the explanatory notes in my Bible, I realized that this teaching by Jesus is not limited to money and tithing, although I believe we are definitely investing in eternity with our tithes. Beyond that, however, I believe the Scripture relates to all acts of obedience to God. When we make God the center of our lives, our hearts will be exactly where He asks us to be. When we act in disobedience to God and chase after things of this world, our hearts will be far away from the only true peace we will ever find, which is smack dab in the middle of Jesus and His crown.

Grace is where true fortune is found. Grace, such an amazing, incredible, undeserved gift, is exactly where our fortune truly lies. We can strive for success, strive to attain things, and strive to find happiness along the way, but the only true happiness and peace I have found on my journey has always been when God's grace and love have shone through in my life, when I have felt His holy presence all around me. The joy I get from that new pair of shoes lasts such a short time, but this is a joy that will last for all eternity.

And best of all, it's free! Free to you and me, that is, because Jesus paid such an incredibly high price on the cross in order to allow each of us the opportunity to spend eternity with him. It's like filling your shopping cart to the brim with the most expensive shoes and clothes in the world and getting to the checkout lane, only to be told that you get it all for free! I like that kind of deal!

Money's had its hold on me, but here and now I'm breaking free. I've got to find a better me. I knew there was someone so much better hiding inside me if I could let go of my obsession with finances and focus on what's really important: God's love and grace in my life. The fact that I stand here a sinner yet am given eternal life because of the price Christ paid on the cross is overwhelming when I really drink it

in. What more could I possibly need in life?

Jesus gave a great example of the hold money can have on us when he had a conversation with a wealthy young man. Now, this guy was a good guy, he was following all the Jewish laws, doing all the “right” things, and seemed like he had it all together. He was probably the kind of guy who was involved in tons of service groups and looked up to by the entire community. Jesus looked right through him, however, and knew the love of money that was lodged deep within his heart. He exposed his true motives when he challenged him to “Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me,” Mark 10:31. This young man who was doing so much right in his life turns away dejected, knowing that he couldn’t do what Jesus was asking him to do. He couldn’t part with all his “stuff.”

Jesus goes on to tell his disciples, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:24, 25). I guess Jesus had a sense of humor! He offered some really harsh words in a very comical way if you try to picture a huge, smelly, spitting camel attempting to go through the eye of a needle. Impossible! As I thought about it more deeply and read annotations about this verse, it started to make more and more sense. Consider this: when our physical needs and wants are taken care of, it’s easy to become self-reliant and move away from faith.

If we are feeling sad or depressed, we just go buy something new to make us feel better instead of turning to God and drawing closer to

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Him for comfort. Our abundance and our wealth actually become our greatest burdens because they keep us from true dependence on God. We can have all the money in the world and lack the most important thing—eternal life. We can be rich by worldly standards but be the poorest of the poor by eternal standards. Sadly, Jesus knew this wealthy young man would never know true peace because he would never part with the riches of this world.

I'll live a brand new way, because today I'm gonna be investing in eternity. Now that I've realized my sin and the hold money can have on me, the challenge is to live this out in everyday life. How do we live in this world but not be of this world? How do we strive to provide for our families yet not get caught up in the race for too much stuff? How do we justify all that we have here in America with all the poverty, hunger, and devastation we see around the globe? How can our lives truly be a reflection of God's love and grace?

I honestly don't have the answers to all those questions, but I believe we can each take steps in the right direction if we focus on eternity and God's plan for our lives rather than the material race for more things. For my part, I need to be in a constant state of self-disclosure and honesty about where my heart is before I make any financial decisions or make choices about how to spend my time. It has taken me a long, long time to figure this out, but I am realizing more and more that all the little decisions I make say a lot about where my heart is.

The more I invest, the more I will be blessed.

The more I lay down, the more treasure to be found.

The more I give up, the more you fill my cup.

The more I lose my life, the more I get it right.

When I got to the bridge of this song, I wanted to write about the benefits of changing this train of thought. The main objective and

goal is to please our heavenly Father, but the reality is, we will also have much fuller lives. I'm not talking about money at all when I say "*the more I invest, the more I will be blessed*" or "*the more I lay down, the more treasure to be found.*" What I am trying to convey is the truth that the more I invest in my faith, the more blessed my life is. It may not be materially blessed, but it will be blessed in peace and happiness—in the things that really matter.

When I come home from speaking at a women's retreat where I've had amazing conversations with women about their lives and their struggles, their joys and their concerns, as we've cried and supported each other, it's truly the highest high I can be on. Just ask my husband, John. I come home incredibly excited and pumped up, and he lets me ramble on and on about the incredible ways the Holy Spirit was at work. To witness that and be a small part of His working is absolutely amazing! It's those moments that I treasure because I know that I am fulfilling God's purpose and plan for my life. There's literally nothing better.

I recently spoke and sang at a retreat in Dallas, and it was an over-the-top spiritual experience. The Holy Spirit was so obviously present in the room, and women connected on a deep level. I stood there in the midst of it and said a silent prayer of thanks to God for allowing me to be there because I knew this was exactly where He wanted me to be. It feels so good when you know you are centered in the middle of God's will for your life, and that's what I felt that weekend.

Jesus says in Matthew 23:25, 26, "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." I have found that the times in my life when my cup has been totally empty are the times God fills my cup to overflowing.

Circumstances may not change, difficulties may not go away,

dreams may not be fully realized . . . yet my cup overflows. The key point is: I have to empty myself of the stresses and worries of everyday life, and allow God to fill me up with good things.

Without fail, I have seen the times when I felt the most empty replaced by the times I have felt the most filled. My divorce was one of the hardest times I have ever gone through, yet that was definitely the time I walked the closest with God. My circumstances didn't change, my marriage wasn't miraculously saved, my heartache didn't go away, but my emptiness brought me closer to my Heavenly Father. It was a weird feeling and rather hard to describe, and I felt as if I had nothing left, yet I had everything I could ever want. I had peace in the storm. Life raged all around me, but I found shelter in His arms.

While I know that many of us will struggle with finances and money issues our whole lives and will always have to work hard to get this one right, I do believe that we can make a conscious and concerted effort to change our thought processes and our focus from the trappings of this world to the treasures awaiting us in Christ Jesus. I know I will continue to do battle every day with this issue, but through the grace and love I receive from the bounty of God's blessings, I will invest less and less of me in this world and invest more and more of me in eternity.



We Worship You



Words and Music by Jill Miller

*Lord we stand and we marvel at your endless beauty
It's shown in the way that you love us just as we are
On our own we fall short and feel so unworthy
Yet your love pours down and covers our scars*

*You are holy, deserving our honor and praise
We worship you, Lord, we worship you
You are holy, author of love and grace
We worship you, Lord, we worship you*

*When we fall and the world starts to crumble around us
We can stand on the truth that we find in your word
Nothing on earth can tear us away from your love
You promise when we cry out we will be heard*

*You are holy, deserving our honor and praise
We worship you, Lord, we worship you
You are holy, author of love and grace*

We worship you, Lord, we worship you

Let us be worthy, Lord fill us with mercy

Help us be servants of peace

Let us be worthy, Lord fill us with mercy

Help us be servants of peace

You are holy, deserving our honor and praise

We worship you, Lord, we worship you

You are holy, author of love and grace

We worship you, Lord, we worship you



Worship . . . what does it mean to worship? Are we only worshipping when we're singing in church or in our car, or can we worship with our lives? Webster's dictionary (Merriam-Webster.com) defines worship this way: "the act of showing respect and love . . . especially by praying with other people who believe in the same [G]od."³ So I ask this question: How can we live our lives every day in a position of worship, showing extravagant respect, honor, and devotion to God?

Being a songwriter, I love that one form of worship is through singing songs. When I set out to write this worship song, I knew I wanted just that—a song that spoke of venerating a holy God. I began by looking around at the obvious things, the “*endless beauty*” that lies all around us—the amazing earth we live on, sunsets on the water, a fresh spring rain, a newborn baby's cry, so many beautiful sights and sounds that confront our senses each and every day.

As I write this chapter, I'm at one of my favorite places on earth, Lewis and Clark Lake in Yankton, South Dakota. I grew up coming here to Yankton to camp and boat with my family, and it's a

place that holds not only wonderful memories for me but also speaks of God's beauty. I'm sitting in one of our extremely comfy camping chairs watching and listening to the waves gently wash ashore. The sun is starting to go down, and it's shining brilliantly on the colorful chalkstone cliffs across the lake. Sea gulls are lazily skimming the water, looking for something to eat. A soft, gentle breeze is making it cool and comfortable, and it's positively breathtaking. I feel incredibly blessed at this particular moment as I am keenly aware of the beauty of nature. I can always feel God here. That's probably why I love it so much.

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WHY I LOVE IT SO MUCH.

I can also easily be overwhelmed by the beauty of fall foliage, a bubbling brook in the mountains, or a butterfly perched on a flower. All of these images are gentle reminders of God's originality and His never-ending creativity. Take a careful look at a picture of a zebra if you've forgotten how creative God is. Who but God could think of an animal adorned in such a way?

As beautiful as His handiwork is, however, I personally recognize God's beauty most when I think of the way that He loves us. He "*loves us just as we are.*" There are lots of days when I feel anything but lovable. I try to be lovable, believe me; I try really hard because I am a total perfectionist. Yet there I am . . . being short with my kids, impatient in the checkout line, and harboring resentment and anger at a past wrong someone has done against me.

I'm also a very introspective person, which is probably why I'm a songwriter. I know this helps me go deeper and dig into my songs, but it also has me digging deep inside myself at times, and the view isn't

always pretty. In fact, most of the time it's not pretty at all. I see the anger, the jealousy, the fear, the lack of forgiveness, my quickness to judge, and all the other demons that are lurking inside me. It looks like an incredible mess to me, and I truly wonder how God could ever love someone with such flaws. How can He see past my weaknesses and love me day after day, failure after failure, bad decision after bad decision? Yet the Bible tells me that's exactly what He does. Psalm 103:17 tells us, "From everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him." From the beginning of time to the end of the ages, God's love is with us.

Think about the love you see between a newborn baby and its mother. We've all witnessed the pure joy in a new mother's eyes as she cuddles her newborn, looking at her precious baby with a love and devotion that is palpable. You can see it, and you can feel it. It is beauty at its best. But God's love is even bigger than that, a thought that I struggle to really get my arms around. It seems so impossible, yet I know it's true. I can never do anything to make him stop loving me or to make Him love me any more than He already does.

I guess it's so hard to fathom because human love is so often conditional. Oh, we love our spouses and our children with all our hearts (hopefully), and always will, but it is easy to write off other people in our lives who have hurt us in one way or another. Friends who disappoint us can be replaced with new friends. Coworkers are simply tolerated because we have to work with them. People who cross us are simply written off. When we get hurt, we feel more and more vulnerable and less and less willing to give our love away the next time. But not so with God! His love is unconditional and never-changing. That deserves our worship!

The best part of His love is that it "pours down and covers our scars." The truth is, we all have scars of one type or another. Oh sure, we try to hide them from the rest of the world, we try to tell ourselves they're no big deal, but they are there nonetheless. They affect

our view of the world whether we want them to or not. Maybe it's the scar of a divorce, a bad decision, an act of violence we were the victim of, the perceived lack of a parent's love, hateful words from a friend, or any number of things that have left their marks on us. We can go to counseling and deal with them, try to get past them and become functional in spite of them, but they're still there. They remain as permanent reminders of the life we have lived to this point in time. They teach us and, unfortunately, they sometimes define us.

I think of a woman from my hometown whose scars define her. For the sake of this story, let's call her Annie. Annie was not scarred in a physical way, but emotionally she had lingering marks from a very nasty, painful divorce. It was evident every time you talked to her. Annie wasn't a close, personal friend, more of an acquaintance, so when I would run into her, the conversation would generally be fairly casual, the usual musings about our children and their activities.

One particular time I saw Annie's scars quite clearly. I ran into her at an outdoor festival. It was a popular local arts festival, and it was a great way to reconnect with people you hadn't seen for a long time, besides seeing some great art. I saw Annie in one of my favorites places, the line for the bathroom. Any of you who know me know that I'm *always* in the line for the bathroom! Anyway, the line was rather long, and we had to wait a bit, so we had a chance to talk beyond the typical "How are you?" . . . "I'm fine" pleasantries.

As we were talking, the subject of her ex-husband somehow crept into the conversation. As I think about it, he always seemed to find a way to creep into any conversation I had with Annie. She proceeded to go on and on about how they were going back to court yet again over some squabble about money, and she rehashed stories that I had heard many times. She recounted his leaving, the other woman he had left her for—some very heavy stuff. She had every right to be hurt, and I felt genuine compassion for her, yet one thing really

struck me that day. She talked about her divorce as though it was happening *right* then. If I didn't know her, I would swear that it was a fresh, new wound. The fact of the matter was, her divorce had taken place more than eight years before! A long time had gone by, but her anger was still strong and the hurt so deep.

I left the festival that day thinking about Annie and feeling very sad for her. I wondered if she would ever be able to move on, to heal from this scar, to somehow find a new life in spite of the horrible things that had been thrown at her in the past. The sad reality is that some people never do.

I know that God sees every one of Annie's scars and is ready to heal them the instant she accepts His love and grace into her heart; this is because "*his love pours down and covers our scars.*" It's not that she won't remember the past, but it will not control her future any longer. There's no therapy in the world that can achieve the transformation God can perform in our lives. I have gone to therapy myself off and on throughout my adult life, and I believe, 100 percent, that it can be effective. But I also know it has limits. It can give us the tools we need to move forward, but only God's love can fill the empty spaces those scars leave in us. My continued prayer is that Annie finds that love someday and can move past her past. She is a beautiful woman and has so much to offer.

*When we fall and the world starts to crumble around us
We can stand on the truth that we find in your word
Nothing on earth can tear us away from your love
You promise when we cry out we will be heard*

We Worship You

Where I was when this song came to me: My music room, looking out at the beautiful landscape

Month, year written: May 2012

How long it took me to write: I wrote the melody and the first verse and chorus in one sitting, probably about two hours. The second verse and bridge came later. I actually rewrote the words for the bridge in the studio right before we recorded it. Nothing like waiting until the last minute!

When I just knew I ‘had it’: When I heard the session players in Nashville start playing it, I got chills. It felt like worship, and that’s exactly what I wanted.

Anything else fun about ‘We Worship You’? When I started writing this song, I intentionally tried to write a simple melody, something that people could catch on to quickly, which is important for worship songs. It’s been fun to see that I succeeded because I have used the song at women’s retreats across the country, and everyone can quickly sing along with me. There is nothing like hearing a room full of people worshipping with a song that you wrote. A little piece of Heaven!

Paul tells us very powerfully and clearly in Romans 8:38, 39 that he is “convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” How often do we realize and drink in what an amazing truth that

is for us? Nothing we do, no circumstance in our lives, no pain that we might be experiencing . . . nothing whatsoever can separate us from God's love. Our circumstances may make us feel as if we are separated at times, but the truth is, He is still right there beside us. In a world constantly changing, that thought gives me an incredible sense of peace. It's something I can count on. I can't always count on life to be what I want, but I can always count on God to be all I need.

The only thing God asks for in exchange for all the unconditional love and grace He lavishes on us is that we worship Him. So I go back to the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter: How can we live our lives every day in an attitude of worship, showing extravagant respect, honor, and devotion to God?

Psalms 29:2 tells us to "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness." And John 4:23, 24 says, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." But how do we live that worship out in our everyday lives?

Jesus was talking to a Samaritan woman at a well in the little village of Sychar. This woman thought worship could only be done on the mountain, and in the same way that her ancestors did, or in Jerusalem at the temple. Jesus told her (John 4:21), "Believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." What a relief! We don't have to be in a particular spot or perform a specific ritual in order for our worship to be pleasing to God. We are free to do it wherever we are. Cool! That makes things a lot easier.

Worship is also actually part of our job description as Christians. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2:9: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, *that you may declare the praises of him* who called you out of darkness into his wonderful

light.” We are all called to worship and give praise.

WE CAN SIMPLY
SIT DOWN, HAVE
A CONVERSATION
WITH GOD, AND
WORSHIP ON OUR
OWN. I LOVE THAT!

So how do we do this? How do we declare the praises of God? To me, worship involves three things: our heart, our ears, and our actions. Jesus tells us that worship must be sincere. External things don’t matter if our hearts aren’t in the right place. Our physical location and the songs we sing mean nothing if our hearts aren’t really in it. Jesus was critical of the way the Pharisees worshiped, and he quoted Isaiah when he said, “These people worship me in vain; they honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matthew 15:8, 9).

So obviously, our hearts and our attitudes matter when it comes to worship. We have to believe what we are saying or it means nothing. It’s useless chatter, like so much of what we see on TV these days! It’s noise, and it’s saying something, but nothing of any substance. Shakespeare called it “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing!”

Worship also involves the act of listening. Praising God is great, singing songs and bowing down in worship are necessary, but if we don’t ever take the time to listen, we have to question if our praise is real. If we praise God for being holy and righteous and loving, shouldn’t we take the time to be attentive to what He is trying to say to us? It’s really just good manners if you think about it. We’ve all been around the person at the dinner party who talks the whole night about themselves and never takes the time to listen to anyone else. It’s very annoying and shows a lack of respect. Listening is important, and it’s another way we worship God. When we listen to God, we acknowledge that God is worth listening to.

And finally, I believe we worship by what we do. All talk and no action do not show extravagant respect, honor, and devotion to God.

Since we all know that actions speak louder than words, this is one area where I think we can be in danger of missing out on worshipping God the most. To me it's the little things that can be a form of worship: a smile at the checkout girl who (you can tell) hates her job; extra patience for the new waitress who can't seem to get your order right; extending yourself to the new person you see at church who looks out of place; or refusing to participate in gossip about one of your coworkers. These are the types of little, everyday decisions that, we can be sure, make God smile.

It's interesting to note how Jesus worshipped. If you look through the gospels, you will notice that although Jesus went to Jerusalem for annual festivals, the majority of his worship was done away from the temple. Numerous times it is mentioned that he went off by himself to worship and pray. He didn't make a public spectacle of these times. He worshipped in private, just a simple conversation with His Father. This should really take the pressure off us because we don't have to go anywhere special or say the exact right words to worship. We can simply sit down, have a conversation with God, and worship on our own. I love that!

Micah 6:6-8 tells us: "With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn child . . . He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Hmmm, sounds to me like the way I act and love and walk mean more to God than anything. The way I live my daily life can either be in worship or in self-fulfillment. I can either show extravagant love and respect with my actions, or I can choose to live in pursuit of myself and my needs only. We all have the same choice.

There's so much to worship God for, as the *"author of love and*

grace.” I talk about grace a lot in my songs; it’s because grace means so much to me. Being a perfectionist, I’m keenly aware of how many times I fail God in a day. I’m constantly pointing out to myself the little things I forgot to do, the things I tried to do and failed, and the many reasons why God could never love someone like me! Even if I do something 99 percent right, I will beat myself up over the 1 percent I screwed up on! It’s just the way I’m wired, I guess. Yet the Bible, the inspired Word of God, tells me that even though I sin and fall short every single day, God loves me anyway. He loves me in spite of me. If grace isn’t pure beauty, I don’t know what is.

When I got to the bridge section of the song—“*Let us be worthy, Lord, fill us with mercy. Help us be servants of peace*”—I wanted to call on God to help us live our lives in a way that is pleasing to Him. I believe we have to call on God every single day to give us mercy and fill us with peace because, on our own, we will constantly get caught up in trivial things. To be a servant of peace, to me, means being in such a state of worship every day that the light of Jesus Christ shines through everything I do and people can see God’s mercy and peace simply by the way I live my life. I want to let my “light shine before others, that they may see my good deeds and glorify my Father in Heaven.” (I offer that thought as a close paraphrase of Matthew 5:16.) I know I fail much more often than I succeed, but the point is, I have to try. I will never get it 100 percent right, and neither will you, but that’s what the cross is for. Only with the help of God can we reach out in love and mercy to others.

So, my friend, when you hear the word *worship*, and as you wrestle with this question of how you can worship God with great, even extravagant, respect, honor, and devotion, my prayer is that you strive to live your life in a constant state of worship. And when you sing along with this song, “We Worship You,” I hope and pray that some of these images of worship come to mind!



Watch Me Fly



Words and Music by Jill Miller

*I've been up and I've been down, I've been crawling all around this
cold, hard ground*

*God's been waiting patiently, love has got its hold on me and I believe
I can do anything if I let grace give me wings*

*To fly break free from just getting by
Gonna soar take back my life and a little bit more
I know God is shining His light, He wants me to get things right
So he can watch me fly oh
Watch me fly oh*

*I'm changing from the inside out, no more thinking life's about the in
crowd*

*That's not me and that's okay, I'll take different any day then I can say
That I know who I am, I'm a daughter of the lamb*

*I'm gonna fly break free from just getting by
Gonna soar take back my life and a little bit more*

*I know God is shining His light, He wants me to get things right
So he can watch me fly oh
Watch me fly oh*

*In Christ I have salvation and I am a new creation in my Father's eyes
No more feeling I'm defeated, things go wrong I know I'll beat it
God is by my side*

*Fly break free from just getting by
Gonna soar take back my life and a little bit more
I know God is shining His light, He wants me to get things right
So he can watch me fly oh
Watch me fly oh*



Many of you have heard my butterfly story, and I will be sharing it in the next chapter. Because butterflies are so important to me, I've spent a lot of time admiring them and thinking about them—probably way more than the average person. My boys think I'm a little nuts because my music room is filled with butterfly statues, pictures, and other related memorabilia. The thing is, once people know you like and collect butterflies, they buy beautiful trinkets for you, whether they are plaques, picture frames, hand-painted bells, bookmarks, or stained glass creations, just to name a few. Most of the items that line the walls of my room or sit on my desk and piano have been precious gifts from friends and fans who saw something with a butterfly on it and, as they often put it, "thought of me." I love that! I cherish every one of them, and they are all incredibly special to me.

We all know the story of the butterfly, and we all know it doesn't start life as a butterfly. It starts life as a caterpillar, a fuzzy, helpless little creature that crawls along the ground. Caterpillars are called

eating machines because, pretty much, all they do all day long is eat. (Sounds like a great idea to me!) But think about life as a caterpillar: to get from one side of a yard to the other would probably take all day, maybe all week, for these tiny creatures. Their world is very small, and most things must appear as extremely large and overwhelming compared to their size. A small blade of grass is taller than most caterpillars, and an anthill must loom ahead of them like a mountain.

Life as a caterpillar would have to be a little boring, I would think, just eating and eating all day. It might be fun for a while, but it would definitely get old. The only excitement you might have is if you climbed a tree. I can't imagine how a caterpillar even begins a journey that large. Without making such a monumental climb, however, your view of the world wouldn't change very much. It's dirt and rocks and weeds and grass pretty much everywhere you look. Not too exciting. And if you do get brave enough to climb a tree, then you have to be on guard against a hungry bird that wants to make you his lunch.

The other interesting thing is that, I don't think, a caterpillar knows it's going to be a butterfly someday. They're just crawling around, doing their caterpillar thing, when out of the blue they get the urge to start building this chrysalis, or hard-shelled cocoon. I'm not sure what drives them to do this, but build it they do. It's cold and dark inside the chrysalis, and it must feel like life is over for them. If they can think, here's what they may well be thinking: "This is it, this is the end. I've crawled around on the ground my whole life, eaten everything in sight, and now I'm going to die." What a life!

But inside that chrysalis so much begins to take place. The small creature is transforming and changing from the inside out. And then, all of a sudden, a tiny little ray of light starts creeping in and they must be thinking, "Wow, I'm not dead. I'm still alive!" Then they get a burst of energy and start trying to get free and get to that light.

They struggle and fight to break free from the chrysalis. The struggle is massively difficult, and it takes all the energy it can muster, but the fight to break free is what strengthens the newly transformed creature's wings so that it can fly. If you help a butterfly break free from its chrysalis, its wings won't be strong enough to fly; you are, in that way, dooming it to death. It's interesting to note that it's the *struggle* that gives the creature the needed strength so that it can fly.

And when they do finally break free from the darkness of the chrysalis, what a different world awaits them! Instead of crawling around on the ground, the new butterfly can now fly freely through the air. What must it be thinking? Maybe it's something like: "Wow, I had no idea the world was this big or this beautiful. This is great! I can get across the yard in a matter of seconds now when it used to take me all day. And that ant-hill is actually not big at all. It's quite tiny. I can fly as high as the mountains!" The change in perspective makes all the difference in the world.

Life is extremely different for a butterfly compared to its former self of the caterpillar, yet both come from the same creation. They start in the same place.

I believe that's how it is with each of us in Christ. The theme verse for my ministry is 2 Corinthians 5:17-19: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has gone, the new is come. All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, that God was rec-

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onciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting our sins against us.” We are *all* new creations in Christ. We all have the chance to be a butterfly, a beautiful new creation that can absolutely soar.

The coolest thing, and the thing that really sticks out to me about this amazing process, is that God looks at the caterpillar and sees . . . a butterfly, just as He looks at us and sees all that we could be and the ways we could fly. He sees the potential within each of us. He sees us crawling around on the ground, struggling with the everyday problems of life, feeling overwhelmed by the monotony of it all, and He waits. He doesn’t force us to change. He lets us make our own decision to change. And when we are ready, He transforms us into a new creation in Christ; He takes us to a beautiful butterfly, and this from our start as an earthbound caterpillar. His love and grace give us wings to fly.

Even after we are new creations in Christ, we can still feel like that caterpillar inside of us. Sometimes life gets too hard, and it feels like we aren’t getting anywhere, so there we are, crawling around on the ground again. Sometimes we feel like God is sitting up in Heaven on His beautiful throne, and we think that He is enjoying watching us struggle. We read the Psalms of David and the intense struggles he endured, the ways he cried out to God for help. In Psalm 13:1, 2, David cries: “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?” Was God not listening? How long would David have to go on like this? Was God enjoying watching David crawl around on the cold,

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hard ground?

It hit me one day before I went to write this song that, no, God doesn't want us to struggle. He truly wants to watch us fly. He wants us to reach our goals and be happy and comfortable during our brief stay here on earth. He doesn't want us too comfortable, because we have to live in anticipation of Heaven, but he does want the best for us. I don't believe He enjoys watching us struggle. I believe His heart breaks every time our hearts break, and I know He sees every single tear we cry. He's given us free will, so He has to let us struggle and figure it out on our own, but He's right there waiting with something so much better.

It's the same way we are with our own children. When you get down to it, what's your main hope for your kids? What do you want for them more than anything? I know for me, when I cut through it all, I want them to be believers, first and foremost. I want to know

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that they will be with me in paradise. Beyond that, I simply want them to be happy, whatever happy looks like for them. Whether married or unmarried, whether working as a janitor or as a doctor, whether living close to me or far away, my main concern and my main hope is that they be happy . . . that they *fly*.

How much more does our perfect heavenly Father wish this for each and every one of us!

Once I finally realized that God wasn't out to punish me and was not trying to keep me down, my point of view totally changed. He's not a harsh God sitting there heaping bad things on me; He truly wants to watch me fly. He wants to watch his love and grace give me

wings to soar. Life can be more than just getting by. We can have a better life if we take it back.

I believe this transformation is a process, however. I did not experience a once-in-a-lifetime conversion to Christianity as I know some people do. I think it's awesome when that happens, but I believe for many of us it's a gradual change, a gradual awakening. It's something that has to happen from the inside out and often takes longer than overnight. For me it's a daily commitment to follow Christ today!

Inside Out, by Larry Crabb, is a book that has deeply affected and transformed my spiritual journey. If you haven't read it, I encourage you to do so. It's thought-provoking and life-changing. It urges you to go deep, below the waterline, to find out what makes you tick. You have to go much deeper than the superficial levels we all spend most of our time living in and delve into the hurts and disappointments and struggles that make you who you are; this is the only way to affect real and lasting change. It's not an easy read and it will challenge you, but it's very much worth it.

Crabb talks about how we spend so much of our time pretending that our lives are better than they really are and pretending that we have it all together. Crabb writes:

And when we ignore what's happening on the inside, we lose all power to change what we do on the outside in any meaningful way. We rearrange rather than change, and in so doing, we never become the transformed person God calls us to be.⁴

An inside look can be painful, but from my own experience, it is definitely worth it.

Verse 2 in my song was partially inspired by this book.

I'm changing from the inside out, no more thinking life's about the in crowd

*That's not me and that's okay, I'll take different any day then I can say
That I know who I am, I'm a daughter of the lamb*

Not being part of the “in crowd” is a huge struggle for me. I have always been extremely social (just ask my poor mother!) and have always wanted everyone to like me. Growing up, I would worry and stress for days if I thought someone didn’t like me. I would never talk to anyone about it, of course, but I would wrestle in the private battlefield of my mind with a myriad of reasons why this person didn’t like me. It could get pretty heated and tense up there as I thought of all the possible scenarios—how I could have hurt them or done something wrong. I usually came up with something very ludicrous and off the wall. The end result of this was to put even more pressure on myself to be “nicer” the next time I saw that person. All of this was an extremely silly and fruitless game, but at the time it seemed as if it was truly a life-and-death struggle.

Watch Me Fly

Where I was when this song came to me: Nashville Songwriter’s Association International (NSAI) writing room in Nashville

Month, year written: March 2012

How long it took me to write: Forever!

When I just knew I ‘had it’: When I came up with the right chorus . . . finally!

Anything else fun about “Watch Me Fly”? The verse came to me first, and I knew it was very “hooky,” or catchy, right away. I played it for Jamie Slocum, my producer, at NSAI when we were in a writing session. He loved the verse melody right away and

said, “That’s a hit!” The first chorus I came up with was very catchy too, and when I left NSAI to go to a meeting, I kept singing the chorus over and over and thought I really had something. After the meeting, on my way to my hotel, I was singing the chorus again when it finally hit me . . . I had totally ripped off the chorus melody! I was using the melody for “There She Goes” by The La’s for the lyrics to “Watch Me Fly.” Sing it, and you will see that it fits perfectly! No wonder it came so easily and felt so good!

Once I realized I had taken this melody from another song, of course I had to change it. That’s where the struggle began, and this song almost got grounded. It was hard to come up with something different once I had the initial melody in my head. I have a folder on the songwriting software that I use where I record my melody ideas under each title. I had more than twenty different chorus ideas for this song, and none of them felt right until the melody you hear now finally came to me. It was probably the hardest I have ever worked on a melody because I couldn’t get the old one, the rip off, out of my head. Once I broke through the writing block, the song found its wings to fly!

I’m a people pleaser to my core, so other people’s opinions of me have usually mattered much more to me than my own opinions. Many times I didn’t even know what my own opinion was because I was too busy trying to make everyone else happy. It was a vicious cycle, and I felt a desperate need to fit in and be liked. I recently did a personality assessment called the Clifton Strengths Finder; it’s one of those crazy online assessments where you answer random questions that seem to mean nothing. I remember clicking the submit button and saying, quite smugly to myself, “As if that’s going to tell them

anything about me.” But when I read their report on my answers to their seemingly random and useless questions, I was totally and utterly blown away and felt like they had somehow gotten inside my very soul! They nailed me! They said that one of my strongest personality themes was “WOO”: Winning Others Over. Wow, did that fit! It’s a strength of my personality for sure, but it can be detrimental when I feel anger or negative feelings from another person, because I’m just wired to want to WOO, a desire to “win others over.” It’s how I’m made.

This Winning Others Over behavior led me to a state of perpetual busyness. In order to be liked, I said yes to everything that came my way. I often failed to consider whether I had a heart for what I was doing or if I was just doing it to somehow “fit in.” As a result, I wound

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up taking on way too much. I became the “yes” girl, the consummate people pleaser. Add to that my capacity to handle many things at once and the fact that I actually thrive on chaos, and it’s a recipe for disaster. All of this busyness and commotion was my vain attempt to cover the parts of me that felt like they would never measure up, those feelings that

I would never be good enough.

When I read *Inside Out* by Dr. Crabb, I was overwhelmed with the realization of the destruction that this busyness was causing in my life and overcome by the deeper issues that were beneath all the constant motion. Most of the things I was doing were great things, worthy causes, but it was just too much. It was my way of hiding the difficult things going on in my life—the issues in my marriage, the

struggles with my kids, and my grief at the death of my father.

So I took an honest look at my busyness and started working to change things. It was slow at first and especially hard when I felt as if I disappointed people by saying no, but it also felt great to begin to take care of myself. It felt incredibly freeing to put myself first instead of this intense need to please others. I was slowly changing from the inside out as I felt free to be me!

I finally realized it's OK if someone doesn't like me. I don't like everybody, so why would I possibly think that everyone should like me? That's so unrealistic. We are called to love everyone, but we don't have to *like* them necessarily, or want to hang out with them. We all have different personalities and are drawn to different personalities, none of them "right" or "wrong." Just different. That's OK. That's reality. That's real. What a load that insight removed from me when I believed it from the inside out!

Psalm 139:13, 14 says, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful." Do we believe that we are fearfully and wonderfully made? Do we ever really believe that? Could I ever really believe that? Maybe those of you with intense self-confidence and a very healthy sense of self do, but for those of us who struggle with self-confidence—which seems to be a lot of us!—this is a concept really hard to grasp.

What freedom I have found when I can say with conviction that my only identity is being a daughter of the Lamb, a child of God, complete with my flaws and imperfections, yet made new in Christ. Because of the new creation that I became when I confessed my need for the cross, I am able to truly fly. I may have started this life as a lowly caterpillar, but I'm going to end it as a magnificent, beautiful butterfly!



Grace Finds Wings



Words and Music by Jill Miller

*She sits there with her head in her hands
Life hasn't gone the way she planned
She watched him walk out the door
20 years are gone like that
He's so cold, so matter of fact
As he tells her he doesn't love her any more*

*When you fall, think you've lost it all
When life comes down, crashing to the ground
That's when grace finds wings, that's when grace finds wings*

*She picks up her heart there in a pile
Hears to church, she hasn't been for a while
Sits in the back and hangs on every word
All at once her heart comes alive
She sees how much she needs God in her life
Grace is real and it's talking right to her*

Chorus

*Grace is light the world cannot put out
Grace is hope to see beyond our doubt
Grace is everything that we will ever need to fly free*



This song came about in a very special way. In order to tell the whole story, I need to go back to July 2003. I was busy raising my two boys, Christopher and Samuel, and working part time at the Siouxland Humane Society as director of development. Chris and Sam were 9 and 12 at the time, and life seemed to be good—for the most part. My first husband, Jim (for the sake of this book), and I had had many struggles in our marriage up to this point, but we were at what I thought was a peaceful place. We weren't fighting nearly as much as we had in the past, and things were relatively calm. We weren't particularly close—in fact he was distant—but it was better than being in the midst of a battle. I was hopeful that we had worked through most of the issues that had plagued our marriage in earlier years. It seemed as if we were in for some smooth sailing.

Earlier, in September 2002, I had realized a dream when I headed to Nashville with my sister Barb and recorded my first CD. It felt like a fairy tale. I had been writing songs since high school, and Celebrate, a contemporary Christian group I belonged to at my church, was performing my songs at church services and other events. It was fun to have my songs, my babies, getting out there to the world—but I had always yearned to have them recorded in Nashville.

I finally decided to make this happen after years and years of toying with the idea. I found a studio in Nashville, made all our reservations, and away Barb and I went. We were absolutely blown away and in awe of the studio musicians we were able to work with. They were

what is known as “A” session players, the best Nashville has to offer. Many of them had played with some of my favorite country artists, including Martina McBride, who at the time was my hero, along with Amy Grant, who helped inspire so much of my songwriting.

Anyway, back to my story. As Barb and I went to the studio with my little home demos, very basic and rudimentary home recordings, the magic started happening. These amazing players would listen to my very rough home demo and then start playing exactly what I heard in my head—but couldn’t play by myself. It was as if they somehow went inside my head and could hear exactly what I was hearing. I was totally awed! I had never witnessed talent at this level.

We put the musical tracks down for thirteen songs in one day. We worked from 10 in the morning until 10 at night. It was a long, intense day, but it raced by. I then sang the vocals on all thirteen songs the next day, and the day after that Barb and I both put harmony lines down, and then we started the mixing process. On Day 4 we finished mixing all thirteen songs, and the project was completed. Talk about fast! I was so excited with how the songs had turned out and anxious to share them with Jim.

When I went home, fresh new mixes in hand, Jim’s response was far from what I hoped it would be. He liked the songs OK, but he was extremely disappointed that I had done all Christian songs. He wanted me to do some of my country songs as well. I explained to him that this is what I really felt God was calling me to do, but his disappointment was evident.

I ended up going back to Nashville to fix some of the vocals because, after listening to them with fresh ears, they definitely needed some tweaking! The awe and magic of the studio wore off a little bit, and reality set in. I learned very quickly that the studio is not very forgiving, and every little imperfection becomes glaring when you listen back. I felt good about the project after I re-sang the vocals, and we then began taking publicity pictures and designing the CD

itself. All of these things were very exciting and fun to work on. By January 2003 I had my first CD, *My Offering*, in my hands. It was absolutely amazing to hold this CD of songs that I had written. It was a dream come true!

I had this CD, but now what was I do with it besides give it to my friends and family? I had to order a minimum of 1,000 CDs, and I figured I would be using them as coasters for the rest of my life! At the time we had an independent Christian radio station in Sioux City, and the owner, Warren, encouraged me to do a CD release concert. I resisted at first, but Warren was persistent. He loved the CD and wanted me to get it out to people. I finally agreed, and we picked a date. We put up a billboard announcing the event (one of the benefits of having a husband who owns a sign company!) and Warren promoted it on the radio. That's all the publicity that we did, which may sound like a lot, but it really isn't much. I didn't expect anyone other than family and close friends to come. If we had a hundred people there, I was going to be happy and consider it a success.

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But I guess God had bigger things in mind. The night came, and I was filled with great anticipation. With the help of friends and family, we decorated the stage, and it looked beautiful. The group I played with from my church, Celebrate, was going to perform some songs with me. I had created PowerPoints for a few of the songs, and the whole evening was going to be a celebration of this new project. As I was getting ready, I looked out the window at the parking lot and saw that it was filling up fast; there were all kinds of people walking into the building. My jaw literally dropped. I couldn't believe that many people were coming.

As I stepped onto the stage to a crowd of about five hundred peo-

ple, my heart started racing. I could not believe that so many people had come out to hear my music. I wanted to cry, but I was too excited as I realized that this was where God had been prompting and pushing me to go all along. I became caught up in the moment and sang my heart out. It was one of the best nights of my life. I had done many concerts with Celebrate, but this was the first time my music and my songs were out front. I had the chance to share my heart, my story, and my songs with others. I was finally starting to fulfill the purpose I knew God had for me.

This was April of 2003. So how do we go from there to July of 2003? What happened? While Jim was supportive of me regarding the CD project and the concert, and I know he was proud of all that I had accomplished, he continued to withdraw. I would ask him what was up, and he would have a number of excuses. I learned to let it go and focus on the boys and work, which seemed to be helping.

In July, however, everything came crashing down around me. I learned why he was so distant. He had fallen in love with someone else and had been seeing her since January. My world seemed to end right then and there. I couldn't believe it. I knew we had had problems through the years, but I always thought we loved each other and would make it through whatever came our way. We had survived some really tough things, including infertility, and I thought we were on a slightly easier path now. I never in a million years expected this.

To say I was devastated is an understatement. The hardest thing for me was the rejection I felt. It was literally hard to breathe at times, and I was an emotional wreck. I wanted to lie on the couch and cry all day, with my faithful dog, Nina, by my side. That dog never left my side during that first week, or actually the whole next year, as I went through my divorce. She displayed God's love in its truest form in the midst of my intense heartache.

Jim's confession came about on a Tuesday, and that Saturday I was scheduled to be out in Estes Park, Colorado, for an event called Sem-

inar in the Rockies. If you've ever listened to K-Love on the radio, you've probably heard of it. It's a weeklong seminar held every year for Christian artists. Before this happened I had been so incredibly excited to go. I had been planning on going since January, had paid my money up front. This was the first training seminar I had ever attended for music. I was toying with the idea of doing music ministry as a profession, and this was an opportunity to learn—to gather some ideas of exactly how to do it.

When I got the news about Jim's affair, I called the three people I was going to Colorado with and told them I didn't think I could

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go. I was too sad and didn't want to even leave the house, but they encouraged me to go. I called to see if I could cancel, but I couldn't get a refund at the late date. I had to somehow find the strength to crawl out of my little hole and face the world.

My biggest question at that point was what God wanted me to do. Was I supposed to stay in the marriage and try to work things out, to fight for it, or was God telling me to

move on? I knew that, biblically, I was justified in leaving, but I had no clue what God was asking me to do. Not knowing was the hardest part. I am pretty tough and can handle a lot of things, but not having a clue what path to take was unbearable for me. I also knew that if I was ever going to be in God's will for my life, it had to be right then and there. This was going to affect my children as well as me for the rest of our lives, and I knew I had to be in God's will, not mine. It was all overwhelming and scary.

As I struggled with the question of whether to go to Colorado

while trying to figure out God's plan for my life, one day later that week it hit me: *Hey, I'm heading out to the mountains*. I started thinking about all the mountaintop experiences we find in the Bible. Moses found God in a burning bush, and God actually spoke to Moses, telling him His plan for his life. People came down from mountains totally changed, knowing what they were supposed to do with their lives, and I was sure God was going to do exactly that for me. Maybe it would not be as dramatic as stone tablets or a burning bush, but possibly in a sticky note or something like that! That would be cool! I went with high hopes that I was going to have an encounter with God in one way or another on that mountain, and that He would lay my life out for me, telling me exactly what to do.

The week was remarkable, and as I look back on it, it was truly providential timing that I was there. The seminars and the teaching opportunities were priceless, and I happily devoured it all. It helped me focus on something other than the mess my life was in at the moment, and it kept me centered on Scripture and God's teachings. Every day ended with a concert, and my favorite artists were there, including Amy Grant (my all-time favorite Christian artist!), Fernando Ortega, Mercy Me, Matthew West, and Michael W. Smith. The concerts themselves would have been worth the trip, and everything else, all the other pieces, just enhanced the week.

However, I wasn't seeing what I was hoping for—there was no burning bush, no tablets of stone telling me what to do. I kept looking, but I never found them. My friends and I would go for a hike, and I would be sure there would some sign just around the next bend, some special subscript that only I would see . . . but it never came. Maybe something one of the speakers said would be God speaking directly to me. It never came. Maybe I would have a dream that would show me my path. It never came.

One day, the four of us who attended the seminar together decided to take the afternoon off from all the teaching classes we had been

attending to go write. We are all songwriters, and we all felt the need to relax a little bit, give our brains a break, and write. We were staying at the YMCA of the Rockies, which is a gorgeous retreat center right on the mountains in Estes Park. The views, everywhere you look, are absolutely stunning.

There was a beautiful creek that flowed along the edge of the grounds. We spread out by this creek, found our special spots, and started writing. I was perched on a huge rock that overlooked the creek. I could hear the water rushing by, which is one of my all-time favorite sounds. There's something very special to me about water. When I see it in nature, I am always reminded of the living water of Jesus Christ, and the sound of it moving stirs something deep inside of me. There were also pine trees everywhere, and their powerful scent filled the air. The sun was shining warmly on my back, and a gentle breeze was blowing through the trees. It was a picture-perfect spot, pretty much what I picture Heaven to look like. No streets of gold are needed for me, just give me beautiful vistas found in nature.

I started to write, and the tears started flowing. I was making my own river up there on that rock, and I couldn't stop for a long, long time. When I finally composed myself enough to begin writing, the lyrics that were coming out were quite depressing. I could definitely relate to David in the Psalms when he cried out, "How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?" (Psalm 13:1, 2). David cried out to God and got angry with God, and that's exactly where I was. The songs were horrible and very depressing, songs no one will ever hear, but they were arising from the deepest and darkest parts of my heart that day. My spirit felt incredibly heavy and broken.

As I was writing, I looked up and saw this beautiful yellow butterfly dancing in the wind right in front of me. She was huge, and she stayed literally two or three feet in front of me for a long, long time. It

was like she was putting on a show, a special little dance just for me. She flitted from one side to the other, her huge yellow wings floating on the gusts of wind, and then she would gently wave them back and forth again to propel herself upward. I sat mesmerized by her dance and could not take my eyes off her.

As I sat staring at this beautiful creature, God spoke to my heart, and very clearly. I'm not sure that I heard an audible voice, but I knew exactly where it was coming from, and I understood very plainly what it was saying. He said, "Jill, you are that butterfly, and you are going to be OK because I am right here with you." And then the most amazing thing happened: a peace that passes all understanding washed over me, literally from my head to my toes. It was palpable! It was something I had never experienced before. In an instant a heart that was so broken, so full of fear and hurt, was suddenly full of peace. I knew in that very moment God was breathing new life into me. I would never be the same.

As I thought about it later and relayed to my friends what had happened, I realized I still didn't have a clue where my life was going, whether my marriage would be restored, or if I would be dealing with a divorce. But I did know one critically important thing: God was with me and I was going to be OK. Somehow that was more than enough. I was not going to die from the heartache I was feeling, and I might actually be happy again one day. This seemed a far-away thing, and actually very much like a remote possibility, but I had found something that I desperately needed . . . hope. I knew it was going to be a long journey, but I knew I was going to be that beautiful butterfly. I wanted to be that butterfly. I longed to be that butterfly.

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Everything changed for me from that point on. I had to leave the

mountains a few days later, but that gift from God stayed with me. Throughout the next year I went through a very painful, sometimes nasty divorce. It was horrifying. I felt like a total and complete failure. I had thought that I would be married for life, and here I was in my early 40s starting over because the plain, simple truth was my husband was not coming back. He was done. It was overwhelming at times . . . but I still had that butterfly.

Every single time, and I mean every single time, that I was having an especially hard day dealing with my soon-to-be ex or my kids or life in general, God would send me a butterfly to encourage me. Every time I would see one I would feel it was a special hug from God and I would be reminded of that special encounter I had with God on the mountain. Even in the winter months, when butterflies aren't seen flying around here in Iowa, I would go into a store and see one on a display or on some piece of clothing or something like that, and I would feel God's presence all over again. It was really uncanny, and something I am eternally grateful for.

When you think about it, God is incredibly smart—obviously smarter than I am! I thought I wanted an answer about what to do with my life; I was praying for clear and concise direction. That's all I wanted, but God knew better. He knew what I really needed, something that would sustain and lift me for a lifetime. If he had just told me what to do in this one situation, His blessing would have been over after a year. I would have gone through my divorce and that would have been the end of it. But the gift He gave me will never end; it will never dim for me. As I reflect on it now, I am moved to tears when I think about how real and special that gift was. I know I am blessed beyond measure to have experienced God in such a real and intimate way that day on the mountain.

Well, back to the song. I have shared my butterfly story with many groups around my hometown. Eventually, I wrote a song called "Butterfly," and it became the title track for my second CD. As a result, I

quickly became associated with butterflies, and people continue to come up to me after shows and share their butterfly stories with me, which I totally love!

Let's fast-forward now to 2012, nine years after my butterfly encounter on the mountain. I found myself in the emergency room after same-day surgery to remove my gall bladder. I had had surgery on Thursday, and things had been really rough, so the doctor advised me to go to the ER on Sunday.

The doctor and the nurse in the ER were incredibly kind to me, and they gave me wonderful care. They checked me out, found out what was wrong, and sent me home later that afternoon. As she walked out of the hospital room with me, the nurse asked me who did my hair—she loved my hair. I had just spent four days in bed, so I kind of chuckled and thought, *Wow, that's amazing that you like my hair at this point in time!*

Then she gave me a hug and said, "We share the same story," and I could see the hurt in her eyes. I wasn't 100 percent sure what she was talking about, but my gut told me it was my butterfly story. We had to fill out paperwork before we left for home, so I didn't have the opportunity to dive into it any deeper with her, but I kept wondering what her story was.

About six weeks later, I got a call from this sweet nurse, who asked me how I was getting along. She wanted to make sure my recovery was going well, and then she started telling me her story. It turned out I was right; it was my butterfly story she was talking about. She poured out her heart to me and relayed how her husband of more than twenty years had left her for another woman. Her children were grown, so she was alone and devastated. The rejection was overwhelming. Her main question to me was, "How did you do it? How did you make it through?" She described how much of a struggle it was to simply get out of bed in the morning and go to work. The smallest thing was so hard to do. I could totally relate.

She asked me for advice. She pleaded with me: “What do I need to do? How do I find a way through this heartache?” I shared with her some of the things that worked for me. Number one, I encouraged her to live in the Psalms. When I was going through my divorce, the Psalms came alive for me. I could so easily relate to David and the incredible laments he shared at certain times and the amazing joy at others. He expressed himself and his emotions with total abandon, and I told her that any emotion you are feeling can be found somewhere in the Psalms. My advice to my new friend was to look at the ways David cried out to God, and to follow his lead.

I also encouraged her to find a few good friends that she could share her struggles with. For me I found that it was better to be open and honest with a few people rather than raw and hurting with everyone. I needed to find those few friends who were safe and with whom I could share all my hurt and anger.

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We ended our conversation with lots of tears from both of us and with me praying for her on the phone. I realized so clearly that her story was my story, and it brought me right back to where I had been nine years earlier. The hurt and pain in her voice were so real, and I knew exactly what she felt. There's camaraderie in those shared experiences that can't be described or fabricated. It's real and true and honest.

When I hung up the phone after half an hour or more of conversation, I felt this urge to go to my piano. I knew the Spirit was calling

me to go there. I have learned through the years to be obedient! I started plunking on some keys, no particular melody or words in mind, and all of a sudden a song started forming. I had a verse and chorus written before I even knew what was really happening. I was crying and writing at the same time, and in a way I felt like I was just a vessel for the Holy Spirit. Probably about an hour later the song was written. I recorded it quickly on MasterWriter, the song-writing program I use, and went to bed. I felt drained but also had an incredible sense of wonder at the way God had used my story to touch someone else. I knew it was not an accident that our paths had crossed in this way.

The next day I listened to my recording and thought, *Wow, that's a good song. I need to keep working on this one!* Often when I listen back the next day, the song that I was so jazzed up about the day before will seem trivial and mundane. This one hit me as something that needed to be groomed and was worth putting time and effort into. It was real and personal, the kind of song I love to write.

I tweaked the lyrics, but the melody stayed pretty much the same. It seemed to have written itself. I love it when that happens!

This whole experience left me with one important truth and one of the reasons I am writing this book. I believe with all my heart that we are called to share our stories because we are all a part of God's story. You may feel small and unimportant, but that's not the case. We all have something to share with others, and even if you reach only one person in your time here on earth, that one person will be changed forever because you had the courage to share your story. It doesn't have to be pretty, it doesn't have to make sense, it doesn't have to be tied up with a neat little bow. It is most likely going to be messy and ugly at times, but your story might just be the same as someone else's story. Your story matters, and sharing it can truly make a difference.

As I was on the phone with my new friend Nancy that night, I

remember praying silently that the Holy Spirit would give me the right words to say. I could hear so much pain and total despair in her voice. I recognized it very clearly from having gone through the same devastation years before. I knew she was at a breaking point, and I knew I had a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make a positive difference in her life. I didn't want to mess it up, so I prayed. I asked God to give me words as we were talking. How could I answer these questions she was asking me? I'm not a theologian or a Bible scholar. I'm just a normal person who has gone through some hard times. I'm nobody special.

However, I knew that, somehow, I was called to be Christ in that moment and to offer whatever encouragement I could. I needed to be the hands and feet of Christ and to offer a glimmer of hope in her dark world. On my own I could never do it, but I knew the Holy Spirit could move through me if I just opened myself up to his calling and let Him give me His counsel and guidance.

It's the same with all of us. Our stories may be not magnificent or earth-shattering, but they are our stories. They are what God has given us to share. They have the capacity to touch and encourage others if we are willing to share them.

Grace Finds Wings

More about the night I wrote this song: Sometimes when I sit down at my piano I have an idea in my head, something I want to write. This night I simply obeyed. I listened to the muse and wrote Nancy's story as best I could.

Month, year written: February 2012

How long it took me to write: Two hours

When I just knew I ‘had it’: *When I listened back the next morning to my work tape*

Anything else noteworthy about “Grace Finds Wings”? *Nancy came to my CD release concert, and she knew that I had written the song for her. After the concert, we hugged and cried and prayed together again. I am happy to report that Nancy has moved on and is happy and full of God’s love and peace today. I love how God has a way of showing up anywhere, including emergency rooms.*

It can be scary to share the deepest parts of ourselves, to be vulnerable with others; yet we are called to do just that. As I entered into Nancy’s story, my story became alive and full of purpose. Finally, there was a reason I had gone through all that I had. Maybe my story happened so I could help the next person, so that I could pay it forward. I’ll never know until Heaven exactly why I’ve experienced the different things I have or why my good friend went through the devastation of losing a child or why we lose loved ones way too early, but I stand confident that there is a purpose for every story in my life and in your life as well. No matter if it’s good or bad, happy or sad, there is a reason for everything that we have gone through, or at least a chance for us to learn from every experience. I’m not sure I believe God sits up on His throne and says, “I think I will give Jill a crisis today,” but I do believe that every experience is an opportunity for growth, an opportunity to discern a new lesson.

Corrie ten Boom wrote in her book, *The Hiding Place*: “This is what the past is for! Every experience God gives us, every person He puts in our lives is the perfect preparation for the future that only He can see.”⁵ God sees the big picture while we are left struggling to un-

derstand the tiny snapshots of our lives. This is where our faith has to kick in, trust has to rule over doubt, and where we have to surrender to the big picture and the One who sees the big picture.

I've also discovered a very deep truth along my journey, and this from a question we all ask ourselves. Instead of saying "Why me?" when trouble comes our way, I've learned to ask "Why not me?" Why should I be spared things and others not? Why should I have it easy as I watch those close to me struggle? It helps me feel not so sorry for myself, which is something I used to do a lot. I would have my own little private pity party and no one else was invited! It wasn't a very fun party, either: no balloons, no cake (well, maybe there would be chocolate on those bad days, because chocolate always seems to help!), and no pretty decorations. It was just me and my "woe is me" attitude. As I have learned to change the question from "Why me?" to "Why not me?" it's becoming much easier to handle the disappointments and struggles in life as they come.

I have digressed from Nancy and the song. Sorry about that; that's how my mind works at times! Well, the song I wrote that night actually became the title track to my latest CD, *Grace Finds Wings*. Nancy came to my CD release concert and, of course, I sang the song I had written for her. After the concert we hugged and cried and prayed together again. She is doing better, finding hope again, and learning to live the new life she has been given. I know she still has really bad days, days where she feels defeated, but I know her faith is growing by leaps and bounds. She will survive, and sometimes that's more than enough.

So, "*When you fall, think you've lost it all, when life comes down, crashing to the ground that's when grace finds wings*" . . . these are words that I have found to be so true in my life. When things are going great, I often turn my back on God and my faith. When things crash down around me, I instantly go to my knees. The year that I went through my divorce was my year of deepest spiritual growth

ever . . . I mean ever. I felt as if I had nothing, and I spent hours alone in prayer and conversation with God. Much of that time was spent with me shaking my fists at Him, telling Him how unfair this all was, and other times were spent crying more tears than I ever dreamed you could cry.

It may sound crazy, but I've sometimes longed for that closeness again. I was keenly aware of His presence around me and found Him at every corner. The thing is, I know God hasn't moved. He's always been that close and is right there at this very moment. I'm always the one who's moving. I'm always the one getting caught up in the busyness of life and moving away. I'm the one letting the noise of the world overpower His tender and gentle whisper. I forget to read my Bible. I don't have time for prayer time. I drift slowly and quietly away. Yet He waits patiently for me to come back again.

Grace finds wings and faith becomes real when it feels like it's all that we have left. And it's a light—no, a shining beacon—that can never be put out. Husbands may leave us, friends may disappoint us, but “nothing on earth can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). The light of God's love can never be put out. In a world that seems to be changing every day, what a comfort to know that one thing is certain and never changing.

New technology is being introduced all the time, and as soon as you buy the latest phone or computer it's nearly obsolete! It's hard to keep up with all the latest apps that promise to make life easier. To

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me, they often do the exact opposite, and seem to only complicate things. My head spins with all the latest and greatest the world of technology has to offer. I need to know that some things will be the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, something that I can always count on. God's love is the only thing I know that fits that description.

"Grace is hope to see beyond our doubt . . ." How true those words were to me when I was going through my divorce. I had so many doubts about life and mostly about myself: Hadn't I been a good enough wife? Would I ever find love again? Would I ever find anyone who would even want to go out with me with my kids? Was I pretty enough? Was I lovable? These doubts flooded my mind, but God's grace and love slowly and gently dispelled them.

The hardest thing about my husband leaving me was the rejection. *I must be a total loser if he's leaving me*—it's a typical thought. This blew all my fears as a people pleaser out of the water. This was the ultimate rejection. I will never forget the day I was reading about Jesus' crucifixion. I had read and heard this story tons of times in my life, as most of us have who have grown up in the church. If you didn't know any other story from the Bible, the story of the crucifixion is one that you knew pretty well.

I thought I knew every nuance to this story, but this day something jumped out at me that I had never "gotten" before. I love it when Scripture does that. Something you've read before suddenly comes alive in a brand new way. This particular day I finally realized the rejection Jesus himself endured on the cross. He had come preaching truth and love and forgiveness, but instead he was ridiculed and rejected by thousands! Thousands of people mocked him and rejected the good news. All at once I realized that only one person, my ex-husband, had rejected me, but Jesus was rejected by so many. Jesus absolutely knew what I was feeling.

It changed so much for me, and I had such peace knowing that

Jesus really did know how I felt. He had experienced it on a much greater level than me, and that helped make my little rejection suddenly seem bearable. I didn't quite feel like such a loser. I was lovable! I was a good wife! I was a good person! I had made plenty of mistakes, and I wanted to learn all I could from them, but there was hope again beyond all the doubts that were floating around in my brain.

"Grace is everything we will ever need to fly free." Would I ever really fly free again? Would I ever really be happy again? I doubted a lot during that first year, but hope kept coming through; grace kept showing up in the most unexpected places.



Come



Words and Music by Jill Miller

*I am tired, so worn out, life has left me full of doubt
I fear I've let your mercy down, life has kicked me to the ground
But yet I hear you call, saying come, give me all*

*Come and I will give you rest
You say come and your life will be blessed
Watch and learn from me and I will give you peace
Come*

*You gently calm this fear inside, I feel no need to run and hide
You won't give me what I can't hold, your love will help my fear be bold
So I answer your call and I give you my all*

*As you say come and I will give you rest
You say come and your life will be blessed
Watch and learn from me and I will give you peace
Come*

*I won't worry and I won't fret, I know your love hasn't failed me yet
I will learn the rhythms of your grace and wait to meet you face to face
I won't worry and I won't fret, I know your love hasn't failed me yet
I will learn the rhythms of your grace and wait to see you face to face*

*I will give you rest and your life will be blessed
Come, I will give you rest
Come and your life will be blessed
Watch and learn from me, I will give you peace
Come*



From September 2011 to April 2012, I was part of a Bible study group called “Emerging Journey.” We met every Wednesday at 6 in the morning (I know, so early!) for eight months. There were ten of us in our group, so it was very intimate. There was lots of reading and homework assignments to do, and the whole thing felt at times like a college course. But it was an amazing time of learning and growing my faith, and I absolutely loved it! The group also became very, very close, as you can imagine, after spending that much time together and getting very real with one another. The study focused on three main questions: Who is God? Who am I? What does God desire to do through me?

We wrote (and eventually shared with our group) narratives about our lives, our personal stories, and we were encouraged to include those dark places of our stories that can only be shared in real, authentic community. These narratives were incredibly difficult to write, they took a lot of soul searching and digging deep, and we all labored and stressed out over them. The day we shared them with each other at a mini retreat was a day we all felt the Holy Spirit moving among us. It was incredible to watch Him move as we bared our

souls with each other. It was moving and powerful, to say the least. The beautiful thing is everyone has a story, and we are all part of God's story.

We were also asked to get a mentor as a part of this study, and that was a very important part of the whole process. It's a study that I would recommend highly to all who want to deepen their faith and strengthen their walk with Christ.

As part of this study, we had to take a Bible verse and meditate on it; we were encouraged to spend an extended amount of time with one particular passage. The verse they gave us happens to be one of my favorite verses from Matthew, and I was excited about doing this because I love getting away and meditating. It's something I do fairly often (but not as much as I'd like to), because it always holds new insights for me. The writers of the study recommended we use *The Message* translation of these verses, which I was a little hesitant about at first, to be honest, because I don't always like that translation. However, this turned out to be a great version of these verses for me. The words I had read so many times before seemed to come alive in a whole new way. Here's how it reads:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly" (Matthew 11:28-30, *The Message*).

We were encouraged to take these verses and spend a minimum of two hours away, somewhere, meditating and reflecting on them. They then had us answer some questions about the verses. I went to one of my favorite places to meditate, Trinity Heights. It's a local outdoor cathedral that has huge statues of the Virgin Mary and Jesus,

and lots of private areas for prayer and meditation. It was funded and constructed by the Catholic Church, and it is a beautiful place to spend quiet, reflective time. The huge Jesus kind of cracks me up because I always wonder if that's even close to how he really looked, but that's another story!

As I spent time with these verses, the line that jumped out at me the most was “learn the unforced rhythms of grace.” I kept going over and over that single line in my head—the *unforced rhythms of grace* . . . *Learn the unforced rhythms of grace*. I loved the imagery that this conjured up for me, that grace actually has a rhythm about it. It's like poetry in motion. It's like a field of flowers gently swaying in the wind. It's like waves lazily coming to shore. It's like the dance of a butterfly as it floats from flower to flower. It has a rhythm to it that is beautiful and is one of those “you know it when you see it” kinds of things.

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Could I ever get to a point where those rhythms of grace would be unforced for me? Could I ever actually love unconditionally as Jesus did? Could I ever show grace when someone treated me with anger? Could grace ever come that naturally to me? I contemplated those questions and many more for hours at the feet of Jesus.

What I realized is this: while I know I will never achieve perfection, I also know that with God's help I can always be improving. The more time I spend in God's Word and drink in the love and grace He offers me, the more natural it will be for me to share that love and grace with others. The more I am filled, the more I am able to give. I thought about the people from whom I had felt a sense of grace through the years, people who had lived their lives in that rhythm of grace, and the person that came to mind was my first husband's

Aunt Margaret.

Aunt Margaret was a local podiatrist. She had retired by the time I met her, but earlier she had maintained a very busy practice. She never had any children of her own, but Aunt Margaret loved her many nieces and nephews. She always greeted you with a big, long hug and left you the same way. There were no strangers in her world, and she would hug anyone and everyone she encountered. Her hugs were good hugs, the kind that left you smelling her perfume long after the hug had ended, the kind that you melted into, the kind that said, “I truly care about you.” She always had a smile on her face and joy in her heart, and she wore her joy everywhere she went.

Most importantly, she was a woman of faith. I watched closely as she lived her faith out in her everyday life. First and foremost, she didn’t try to hide her faith from anyone. She was faithful and loyal to her beliefs in all aspects of her life; she was the same in public as she was in private. She treated everyone the same, and you could tangibly feel the love of God flowing through her. She had the light of Jesus in her heart, and she wore it with grace. When she passed away I knew God had a beautiful crown waiting for her because of all the kindness she had shared with others throughout her life. She was a woman of true grace in my eyes.

But what if we just aren’t wired that way? What if joy doesn’t exude from us effortlessly? What if we struggle to find the good in life and have trouble letting go of the bad? What about the rest of us? Could grace ever come that easily to people like us?

I have to admit I’m a pretty up-

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beat person most of the time. I've been called a cheerleader, or the Energizer Bunny, many, many times in my life, and I know a lot of the time those tags probably fit. I do tend to be positive and optimistic, for which I'm grateful, but that's a lot different from making grace a normal rhythm in my life. How do I show mercy when I don't feel very merciful? How do I offer forgiveness when I'm still hurting from a wrong someone has done to me? How do I love someone unconditionally?

I know I get the most off track when I get too busy. As I talked about in a previous chapter, that is one of my crosses, one way that Satan can attack me. I get my plate so full of useless things that I don't have time for what's really important—my faith and spending time in God's Word. I'm one person who absolutely must take time to get away with God and pray and mediate for an extended period of time in order to stay grounded. I guess it's my creativity that demands it. If I don't make the time to do this, before I know it I start snapping at people close to me and have little or no patience with life in general! Not a very good picture of grace at all.

Yet Jesus calls out to us in the midst of our busy lives, in the midst of our grumblings, and says, "Come, and I will give you rest. Stop what you're doing and focus on me. Focus on what's important. Focus on what's life-changing, not life-draining. Everything else will wait! Come to me and I will give you the peace you are so desperately searching for." He doesn't yell at us either. He tenderly and quietly whispers to our hearts: "Come."

I think about the story of Mary and Martha in the Bible and how Martha was so worried about all the things to do. She was scurrying around the house trying to get ready to entertain Jesus and his disciples—a big job, mind you—and her sister Mary was sitting there at Jesus' feet seemingly doing nothing. Martha was mad, and she shared her anger with Jesus. Jesus quietly tells her, "Martha, Martha . . . you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are

needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41, 42).

Honestly, I can relate to both of these women. Very often I have been Martha— probably way too often I have been Martha. I spend my time making all the preparations that are necessary, fluttering from one thing to the next, filled with angst and worry, wanting every detail to be perfect . . . and, meanwhile, missing the whole point of the event: time spent in connection with others. That’s the important stuff. Mary got it; Martha fought it. How many times have you and I fought it as well? We want to be the “hostess with the most-est,” and we put an immense amount of pressure on ourselves to make things “just right,” to be the next Martha Stewart. One might say that Ms. Stewart truly fits the Martha in the Bible!

Then I ask myself: is peace really even attainable? Could I ever really change? All these questions came to my mind as I read these verses over and over and dissected them line by line. I believe God’s Word to be true, so I had to believe these ideals were possible because this verse was telling me they were. I definitely wanted to learn to live freely and lightly. Don’t we all? We all feel the weight of the world pretty heavily at times, and we long to have those burdens removed. Jesus’ words tell us that we can live freely and lightly if we lay our burdens at his feet and watch how he does it.

Let’s do that for a moment; let’s watch how Jesus handled things. When the Pharisees tried to trick him and back him into a religious corner, Jesus didn’t fall for their games. In Mark 12:13-17 we read:

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn’t we?” But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. “Why are you

trying to trap me?” he asked. “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” And they were amazed at him.

Jesus showed grace that day. He could have come unglued and derided them about how they were trying to trick him. Instead, he answered them truthfully and honestly and, in my eyes, with a great deal of grace.

Jesus also modeled the exact thing he is asking us to do: getting away, often by going off by himself. Throughout the Bible he was going off somewhere alone to pray. We read this in Mark 1:35, Matthew 14:13, Luke 5:16, and John 6:15, just to name a few examples. It seems a little odd if you really think about it, because Jesus was part of the Trinity; he knew God and the Holy Spirit intimately. I always imagined that they would be talking to each other all the time, if only in Jesus’ mind. That’s how my crazy brain works, anyway. I picture a conversation going on constantly among the three of them in Jesus’ head, maybe because there’s usually a conversation going on in my own head! Yet Jesus took time out of his incredibly busy ministry to get away and have an intimate, unhurried conversation with His heavenly Father. If Jesus needed to do that, surely we need to do it much, much more.

Being an overachiever, I spent time a couple of different days up at Trinity Heights meditating on this verse. The words kept speaking to me, and I wanted to get every insight I could. One afternoon when I returned home my piano was calling me. I love it when it does that. I never know what’s coming, but I feel the need to sit down and start tinkering with ideas because the muse is calling to me, begging me to come and play.

This particular day I sat down and started plunking around on the keys, no particular song ideas in mind, and a melody quickly started

forming. I typically write the words and melody together, but this one was driven only by the melody. I didn't know at first what the lyrics needed to be, what I even wanted to say or write about, but then the words that I had spent the day meditating on started filling in the lines of melody I was playing. They literally fell into place. The words were simple, but I knew they needed to be simple, not complicated or complex. That was kind of the point!

The melody became something that I wanted to sing over and over again, which is always a good sign for me. When I want to keep singing something, that generally means I have something that's "hooky," something that people will, hopefully, want to hear again and again. So I felt good about the melody, but now the task was to work on the lyrics and tweak and refine them. That's always the hardest part, as melody comes much easier for me.

"I am tired, so worn out," seems to be a common feeling these days. I know many of us feel like we're on a giant hamster wheel and can't get off. I have purposely gotten off the wheel more and more as I have matured and discovered why I felt the need to keep so busy in the first place, but the giant hamster wheel still sits in the middle of the room, begging for me to come for a ride! "Come on, it will be fun," it seems to cry. It won't leave me alone.

I am constantly fighting the "just slow down" battle and often feel worn out. I see it in the people around me as well. It seems to be an epidemic in this country. We all seem to live in a perpetual state of running to the next thing. Jesus knew that we would feel that way when he said His gentle, beautiful words: "Are you tired? Worn out?" Absolutely, we are. This isn't a shock to our Savior. He knows. He saw it in Mary and Martha, and He sees it in us as well. Just like Martha, too often we get caught up in the wrong things and miss the important opportunities right in front of us.

Just in case we think it is, this sense of weariness is definitely not new to this century. In the Old Testament we read, "The sun still ris-

es, and it still goes down, going wearily back to where it must start all over again. The wind blows south, the wind blows north—round and round and back again. Every river flows into the sea, but the sea is not yet full. The water returns to where the rivers began and starts all over again. Everything leads to weariness—a weariness too great for words” (Ecclesiastes 1:5-8, *Good News Translation*). Solomon, way back around 935 B.C., wrote about the same sense of busyness that we all deal with today.

Jesus promises us in this verse that He will show us how to take a real rest. Doesn’t that sound inviting? Doesn’t that make you want to express a huge sigh of relief? And the best part about it is, this is something that doesn’t cost money or have to happen in any special place or be done in any special way. This is simply a moment in time

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WHEN A SPOUSE LEAVES AFTER
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DOUBT STARTS TO CREEP IN.

WHEN PRAYERS SEEM TO GO
UNNOTICED AND UNANSWERED,
WE BEGIN TO DOUBT.

where we are in conversation and communion with our Savior. It happens anywhere and at any time when we slow down and choose to be in His presence.

“Life has left me full of doubt” . . . all that running around can leave us doubting so many things in life: whether anything we do really matters, whether God sees us among all the other busy people of the world, whether the cross really cov-

ers up all our sins. There are millions of scary questions and reasons to doubt. When a good friend gets a horrible diagnosis, when healing doesn’t come as we hoped and prayed it would, when a spouse leaves after twenty years of marriage, doubt starts to creep in. When

prayers seem to go unnoticed and unanswered, we begin to doubt. When things never seem to change, we doubt they ever can.

Come

More about the day I wrote this song: When I got home from Trinity Heights after spending the afternoon meditating and praying on Matthew 11:28-30, I was gazing out the bay window in my music room with the words “unforced rhythms of grace” continually going through my head. I tried to picture what that could look like in my life and tried to write a melody that could be an expression of that.

Month, year written: February 2011

How long it took me to write: Around three hours

When I just knew I ‘had it’: Pretty much right away. It felt good from the start.

Anything else fun or noteworthy about “Come”? I’ve had many people tell me how this song has ministered to them and given them a sense of peace. Many people have told me it’s their favorite song on the CD just because of the peace they feel when they listen to it. That makes it a “hit” song in my eyes!

Doubting is something that has been with us since the dawn of time. It’s just part of human nature. We all know the story of Doubting Thomas, the disciple who wasn’t there when Jesus first appeared to the others, the disciple who said, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand

into his side, I will not believe it” (John 20:24). Jesus appears again while Thomas is with them and gently says, “Put your fingers here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe” (John 20:27). Jesus didn’t chastise Thomas, but gently and tenderly helped him work through his doubts. Doubts can be a good thing because doubting something makes us ask questions, and those questions can lead to answers. If the answers are trusted and believed and based on biblical truths, then the doubt has been a good thing. Doubt can actually help grow our faith if we don’t stay “stuck on stupid,” as my husband likes to say, but instead let our doubts strengthen and deepen our faith as we struggle and search to find answers.

“I feel I’ve let your mercy down as life has kicked me to the ground. But yet I hear you call, saying, come, give me all.”

I am incredibly grateful for the mercy that I have felt from God. I cringe when I think about all the times that I have gone to God and asked for forgiveness for some behavior, felt overwhelmed when I felt His love and forgiveness wash over me, giving me grace I don’t deserve . . . and then I go back out and do the same thing again! Argh! Paul told us in Romans 7:15: “For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” I can relate! Sin is simply something we can never get away from. We can try our best, and we should try our best, but it will always creep back into us in one form or another.

Paul goes on to write in Romans 7:22: “For in my inner being I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.” Paul,

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this pillar of the church, one of the greatest followers of Christ who has ever lived, went through the same battles we all do. He felt as if he had a war going on inside of him against sin, and for some weird reason that gives me a lot of comfort. I wage many, many battles in my mind, battles that I rarely share with others, and it feels good knowing that others have experienced the same thing. All I can say is this: some days I'm really glad that mind reading only happens in science fiction movies! It's scary what goes on in my head some days.

In Romans 7:24, 25 Paul goes on to say: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" He calls himself wretched, the man who would later be beheaded for his faith, the man who was an integral part of spreading the Good News throughout the early church, the man who gave up all he had to follow God's calling, the man who inspires so many, nearly two thousand years after his death. If he is wretched, what am I? Yet just like Paul, we are all washed white as snow in the blood of our Savior. That is truly Good News! And in spite of all that sin, Jesus reaches out in love and invites us to come.

"You gently calm this fear inside, I feel no need to run and hide." Have you ever tried to hide from God? Have you ever done something and thought to yourself, *Man, I hope the Big Guy didn't see that one.* I know I have. How crazy is that, really? The Bible tells us that He sees every hair on our heads, and every hair missing from my husband's head (sorry John!), and still we try to hide! We hide because of fear. Yet when I have those quiet moments away with God, those poignant moments when I feel forgiven and loved, suddenly I don't feel afraid any more. The fear of my sin being exposed is removed. I am always aware of my sin, but somehow it doesn't control me as much when I'm grounded in my faith and close to my heavenly Father.

It's kind of like when you did something wrong as a kid and lived

in fear of being “found out.” I know I always felt a huge sense of relief once the infraction was discovered and was out in the open. Even if I got in trouble for it, the fear and worry about being found out was far worse than the punishment ever was.

“You won’t give me what I can’t hold. Your love will help my fear be bold. So I answer your call as I give you my all.” It should be easy to do this part—give God our all—shouldn’t it? On paper it sounds like a walk in the park, but in reality it is incredibly hard to do. The problem is we have to let go of our control when we give God our all, and this is extremely hard for the vast majority of us. We feel this intense need to control our schedules, our kids’ lives, our bank accounts, and the day-to-day dealings of life. It’s interesting when you stop and think about it, however, because there are very, very few

things in this life that we really have any control over anyway! So why is it so hard to let go?

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IRRESPONSIBILITY!

Yet we enter into this battle every day of our lives, this battle for control. Is that control going to be with God or with me today? Too often I want to keep it because I’m afraid of what could happen if I don’t. The unknown is just too much to bear at times. It feels like you are jumping off a cliff without a net or a parachute when you give up control.

Because of our fear, we cling to that control with all of our being, yet that’s the one thing God desires from us—that we give up control. He wants to be no less than the Lord of our lives!

For me, part of giving God my all has meant quitting my “real job” to do music full-time. Talk about feeling as if you’re jumping off

a cliff! That's pretty much how it felt that last day of work when I was driving home, wondering what in the world I was doing getting into music full-time at my age! The music business thrives on youthful people like Taylor Swift, not women who are in the middle years of their lives. It was crazy and ludicrous on so many levels, but it was right in the only place that really mattered: my heart. I knew God was calling me to do this, and that was all that mattered. My pastor, Jeff Moes, said in a sermon once, "Pursuing God-ordained passions, no matter how crazy they seem, is the most responsible thing to do." So I guess I'm exercising responsible irresponsibility!

"I won't worry and I won't fret. I know your love hasn't failed me yet." Matthew 6:33, 34 tells us: "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to us as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." I read these words over and over again and even wrote a song based on this passage, a number called "Worry," yet worry and fret are things I'm very good at doing! In fact, some days I could win a gold medal in the worry race! Not all the time, but if I get good and worked up about something, it can be all-consuming, making it difficult to focus on anything else.

Yet when I look back on my life, it's instinctively clear to me that God's love has truly never failed me. When I have been in the middle of a crisis, I may have felt overwhelmed and afraid; but when I look back and reflect on how things turned out, if I look through eyes of faith, I am usually quickly able to see God's hand leading and guiding me through every step of my struggles. The hours I spent worrying suddenly seem like a colossal waste of my time. Of course there are some things that I don't understand, and probably won't until Heaven, but as I grow older, and maybe a little bit wiser, I am more and more confident that there is truly a reason for everything, even the hard things.

"I will learn the rhythms of your grace and wait to see you face

to face". There's my favorite image from this verse: the rhythms of grace. The more I reflect on those beautiful words, the more I want to learn the dance of grace. To me these words don't mean that we have to stand on our soapboxes and proclaim to the world our faith, but rather the world will see our faith by the very way we live our lives. How could they not see it when we are dancing and moving to the breathtaking music of grace? It seems impossible to learn, but we have a wonderful teacher. Jesus invites us to come, and He will show us the unforced rhythms of grace. He is waiting to teach us all we need to know; we just need to have open hearts, hearts and minds ready to hear His words and observe how He does things.

I'm not 100 percent sure what the unforced rhythms of grace look like, but I'm absolutely certain I will know it when I see it!

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THE DANCE OF GRACE.



Irresistible



Words and Music by Jill Miller and Diona Devincenzi

*I'm walking down the street and I can feel a presence
I look around to see who might be standing close to me, but no one's
there
It shivers up my spine, this tingling of emotion
Your Spirit's creeping into me and there's no getting free
It's breaking me wide open*

*I'm haunted, I can't help but to be drawn in
To your mystery, your magic, your brilliance
I try to find a reason but all I get is a feeling
I should let go and let your love in
You leave me no decision, you're irresistible*

*I've tried to stay away, surrender to the shadows
Where nothing grabs you, nothing matters, life's a battle so you disappear
But, Lord, you keep your eyes on me and when my demons come to
dog me*

*Like a slow seductive kiss I can't resist
You fill me with this longing*

*I'm haunted, I can't help but to be drawn in
To your mystery, your magic, your brilliance
I try to find a reason but all I get is a feeling
I should let go and let your love in
You leave me no decision, you're irresistible*

*You're the touch I can't forget, the song that's in my head
Every day and night I don't know why*

*I'm haunted, I can't help but to be drawn in
To your mystery, your magic, your brilliance
I try to find a reason but all I get is a feeling
I should let go and let your love in
You leave me no decision, you're irresistible*



Some songs start out one way and end another, somewhat like the stories of our lives. I had a title, “Irresistible,” that I thought would make a great country song. I was in Nashville writing with one of my cowriters, Diona, and she liked the title as well. I originally envisioned a song about being in love with someone who was irresistible, unforgettable, undeniable—you get the idea. I had a fun, upbeat rocking song idea running through my head, something with a little bit of a country pop feel.

We talked about it and thought it could be fun, but we decided it was too predictable and had been done too many times. Then Diona said, “What about making it a song about God? God is the one who is irresistible.” Now that was a great idea and an angle I hadn’t

thought of!

We went to work on it, and images started flooding my brain of how God pursues us, comes after us, and makes himself irresistible to us. I had just read the book *Captivating* by John and Stasi Eldredge, and it spoke to that exact topic. It's a great book that I recommend highly. Here's an excerpt from the back of the book:

The message of *Captivating* is this: Your heart matters more than anything else in all creation. The desires you had as a little girl and the longings you still feel as a woman—they are telling you of the life God created you to live. He offers to come now as the Hero of your story, to rescue your heart and release you to live as a fully alive and feminine woman. A woman who is truly captivating.⁶

We went through the book in the Bible study I've lead for more than fifteen years. There are only four of us, so it's a very intimate group. Just the way I like it! We've been there for each other through thick and thin, and we've moved way beyond the surface issues and are free to be open and honest with each other. It's a wonderful picture of an authentic community of believers. I treasure these women and our time together.

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When we went through this book, one of the members of the group was extremely uncomfortable with the images of God as a lover. The whole concept weirded her out, to be honest. God as a lover was just too different. As we delved into that idea and talked about it in depth, it started to make a little more sense. The typical image

of God the Father is a beautiful one, especially if you have a good relationship with your father, one in which you feel unconditional love. But even if you do have a great relationship with your father, it doesn't and shouldn't compare to the relationship you have with your husband. True intimacy is reserved for our husbands, our significant others. They are the ones who share the deepest parts of us.

Besides the sexual intimacy that we enjoy with them, they also have access to the deepest and most intimate parts of our souls. At least they should, in a perfect world. It might not always be that way, but that's the way God intends marriage to be. Two people become one flesh, two people joined together for life, two people 100 percent committed and devoted to each other, "in sickness and in health, till death do us part." We've all heard those vows. I realize it doesn't always happen that way, but that's the intent of the institution of marriage.

So think about it. We are, hopefully, close to our fathers, but we save our true intimacy for our lover, our husband. That is exactly what God desires from us, that deep level of intimacy. He tells us very plainly in the Bible that He is a jealous lover. In Exodus 20:5 he says: "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God." The idea of God as a lover seemed like a very different way to approach a Christian song, which is always a good thing for a new song. We dug in, and "Irresistible" is what we came up with.

"I'm walking down the street and I can feel a presence" . . . have you ever had that happen? Have you ever been walking down the street and all of a sudden you're aware of a presence around you? I know I have. I've been in the midst of my thoughts and all of a sudden I feel something or some presence surrounding me. It almost makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

As I'm writing this it's early in the morning, and I'm camping in Yankton. John is asleep in the camper, and I've slipped outside to

spend quiet time with God and write. I am bombarded by the sights and sounds of the morning: birds are chirping nonstop, welcoming the new day. A cool morning breeze gives me a slight chill, a huge switch from the heat of yesterday. A few people are up walking, but mostly people are still asleep. Camping and all the fresh air and outside activity have a way of making you sleep in when you're here.

The lake is smooth as glass, and there are no boats on it yet to disturb its perfection. The cliffs across the lake look more subdued in the morning sun than they did at last evening's sunset. When the sun goes down, it lights the cliffs and sets them on fire as they come alive with color. It's gorgeous to watch a sunset on the lake, but there's something very peaceful about how those same cliffs look this morning as well. They hold more of a quiet beauty and are extremely calming.

As I close my eyes I feel God's presence all around me. It's irresistible beauty. This is my first time camping this year, and my soul has longed to be up here. There's something about this place that settles me down, helps get me focused, and always seems to reveal a new insight from God. He is irresistible here. I see Him everywhere. He continually calls out to me. Yet when I look at the reality of it, I realize that He's really no closer to me here than He is back at home. He's right there in my kitchen as I'm cleaning up the dirty dishes from supper as well, but somehow He's harder for me to see there.	As I close my eyes I feel God's presence all around me. It's irresistible beauty. This is my first time camping this year, and my soul has longed to be up here.
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I think about all the times I've run away from Him, the times He's been right there, longing to be close to me, and I've ignored Him. Is it because I don't want to hear what He has to say, or is it because I'm

just too caught up in myself and the problems of the day to notice that He's there? Perhaps a little of both. Yet He still keeps pursuing me. He keeps whispering my name in the wind, in the song of the birds, in the everyday happenings of life, the simple times when I'm walking down the street. He is relentless in His pursuit of me. I can reject Him a thousand times, and He will come after me a thousand times and a thousand more. He is unrelenting.

"I've tried to stay away, surrender to the shadows where nothing grabs you, nothing matters, life's a battle so you disappear." Do you remember playing hide-and-seek as a kid? I don't remember playing it myself as much as I remember playing it with my own children when they were little. They loved hide-and-seek and would screech in delight when I found them. Sam was the funniest to play with. He would find a few simple spots, like behind the couch in the living room, and go to that same hiding place over and over again. He was very predictable and always easy to find, but of course I played along and would take my time finding him. I would go to the opposite end of the room and say in a loud voice, "Is he *here!*?" . . . and then go to another area of the room and say even louder, "Is he *here!*? Where could he be?" As I would go in the opposite direction of where I knew he was, I would hear a little giggle from behind the couch.

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I would pretend to not hear it and act like I really didn't know where he was to try to keep the suspense going. That's what made the game so fun, the excitement of being found. When I would finally find him, he would screech in delight as I gave him a big hug and said, "There you are!" Such a simple game with the same result every time, but it provided countless hours of enjoyment

for us.

It's interesting to think about how I have often done the exact same thing in my own life. When things get hard, I go to the exact same hiding spots. If I'm feeling as if I'm not good enough and I will never measure up, I go straight to overwork. Let's cover all those feelings of inadequacy with busyness. It's a hiding spot I know very well. If I'm feeling sad, I tend to isolate. I don't want to see or talk to anyone. If I'm angry or upset with a friend, I simply avoid them, hoping the issue will magically resolve itself and go away.

The problem is, Satan knows my hiding places much too well. He comes and taunts me there. He wants to join the game. He whispers in my ear things like, "You're right, you'll never be good enough. There are so many people who sing better than you do." Or the one that gets me the most: "Your life is too much of a mess to be in ministry. Who do you think you are?" The voices get louder and louder as I hide deeper in the shadows. This game of hide and seek isn't nearly as much fun as the game Sam and I played, so I wonder why I continue to play it.

"But Lord, you keep your eyes on me, and when my demons come to dog me, Like a slow seductive kiss I can't resist, You fill me with this longing." In the midst of this game, when I'm good and hidden, invariably I will open one of my daily devotionals or read something in my Bible and the words will suddenly leap out at me. Some phrase or image will awaken my hope again, and I will feel a hug from God, a *"seductive kiss I can't resist."* I don't screech in delight with the sweet innocence of a child, but I often weep tears of joy at the way God has found me again. He breathes His truth into me once more, that sweet truth that—even though I am so broken, so full of doubts and imperfections—He loves me just as I am. He will never stop finding me. He will never stop playing the game. He keeps trying to reach me, especially through His Word, with verses like Psalm 139:13, 14: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's

womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful.” When I need it the most, His Word leaps out at me, shining a light in my darkness, bringing me out of my hiding place and back to His arms of love.

Especially as women, we all long for and dream about Prince Charming. We’ve probably all kissed lots of frogs along the way, but who doesn’t love the thought that there’s one person in all the world who was created just for them? I used to believe that fairy tale with all my heart and thought I had found that “one” person when I married my first husband, but that was obviously not the case since he left me for a younger woman. I don’t remember reading that in the fairy tale!

I’ve been told once or twice that I live in “la la land,” which I know is partially true. I am definitely an optimist and a dreamer. However, I do believe that it is true there is one person who was made for each of us, and that one person is Jesus Christ. He alone is the lover of our souls, the one who makes us whole. His love will never leave us, and He will always be faithful. I wish I didn’t like the game of hide-and-

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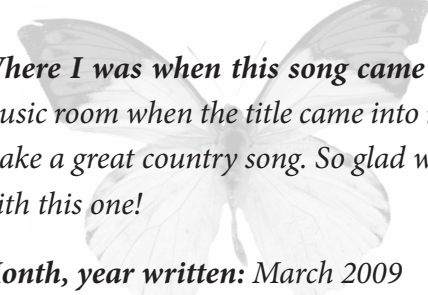
seek so well, but I’m just thankful that God is always willing to come find me.

“I’m haunted, I can’t help but to be drawn in.” When we first explored using the word haunted in the chorus, I loved it, but a part of me resisted. I worried that people would equate haunted with ghosts and spirits and all kinds of negative things. But as we talked about it and looked up the actual meaning of the word, I realized it was perfect. Besides talking about ghosts and supernatural beings, haunted means “to visit often; frequent. To come

to the mind of continually; obsess. To be continually present in; pervade.”⁷ Wow, this was a perfect word! Isn’t that what God should do in every one of our lives, come to our minds continually? And if we’re going to obsess about something, what better thing to obsess about than God! He continually draws us in and is present in our lives. He keeps trying to find us, pursuing us like a lover, pervading our lives, knowing all the time exactly where we are. *Haunted* was definitely the right word to use!

“*To Your mystery, Your magic, Your brilliance.*” I felt that same reservation regarding the word magic—should we use it or not? Would people take it the wrong way? But then I found that some of the definitions of magic include “a mysterious quality of enchantment” and “possessing distinctive qualities that produce unaccountable or baffling effects.” Again, what a perfect word for what God does in our world. Number one, He is totally enchanting if you take the time to look around at the beauty He has created everywhere. The order of life and how nature works in perfect harmony amazes me. The way God uses one person’s pain to inspire others along their journey is powerful. Who could put all these things together so perfectly, so magically, but an Almighty God!

Irresistible



Where I was when this song came to me: *I was sitting in my music room when the title came into my head. I thought it would make a great country song. So glad we went a different direction with this one!*

Month, year written: *March 2009*

How long it took me to write: *We spent more than a year re-working lyrics and tweaking the melody. We had gone lots of dif-*

ferent directions with the lyrics. At first we talked about a sunset, mountains, beauty-in-nature kinds of things. We decided to make it more personal and intimate, for which I'm really glad we did.

When I just knew I 'had it': *When I sang it at a concert in Lake Havasu City, Arizona, where I opened for Jamie Slocum, my producer. Jamie told me after the show, "That song's a hit!"*

Anything else fun or noteworthy about "Irresistible"? *We wanted the song to have a "spooky" feel to go along with the lyrics in the chorus. When we were in the studio and the lead guitar player put the overdubs in on the first verse, like the guitar slide you hear after the word presence, I got goose bumps! It was exactly what I heard in my head, and it gave the song the perfect feel. This song is also one of my band's favorites. Every time we play it they say, "That song should be on the radio!"*

There are also many times that I have been baffled by God. Just when I think something is over and done and there's no way it's ever going to work out, God comes in and saves the day, literally! I think about the Kickstarter campaign that I did to fund this CD project and how it was all orchestrated by God. *Grace Finds Wings* was going to be my fourth studio project, and we were literally out of funding. The well had run dry! I had all these songs that I knew I needed to share with people, but my ministry was not financially solvent at the time, and I didn't know how we were going to make this happen. Then I heard about Kickstarter, a program that helps you reach out to fans to fund your creative project. I read up on it and prayed about it, talked to John and friends about it, and I knew we had to try it.

What did I have to lose except my pride! Kickstarter is an all-or-nothing kind of deal, so if you don't raise your goal, you don't get any of the money. I knew I had to be bold but also realistic.

My friends talked me into really going for it, asking me what I actually needed for the project instead of asking for just a part of it, as I originally thought I should do. "Go big or go home" was the theme! So I put the goal at \$20,000 and started the campaign, confident that God was telling me to do this, but overwhelmed by the goal. Who would really give me that kind of money? How could this really ever happen? Does anyone believe in my music and ministry enough to give to me? It all seemed pretty impossible, but if God was behind it, I knew it could happen.

This was a 30-day campaign, and it started very slowly. At the halfway point, we only had about \$5,000 committed. I was in a bit of a panic when I talked to Pastor Jeff about it after church one day and asked him to pray with me about it. In his usual way, he calmed my fears and gave me great insight. He talked about the passage where Jesus comes upon Peter, who isn't catching any fish after fishing all night. Jesus tells him to cast his net on the other side of the boat, and when Peter does this, the nets are filled to overflowing. The boat almost capsizes because of all the fish. We talked about how I just had to cast my net on the other side of the boat. I felt so much relief and a new excitement for the project. That week I got a major gift, and pledges started steadily flowing in.

The night before the campaign was going to end, we were still a little more than \$1,000 short of our goal. I went to bed with a quiet confidence and peace that God would do the impossible. When I woke up the next day, we actually had exceeded our goal, led by a wonderful pledge of \$1,000! I broke down in tears as I realized that more than 150 people had believed in me enough to contribute financially to my ministry. It was humbling and overwhelming.

I later learned from the person who pledged the \$1,000 that he

had been up in the middle of the night working on finances for a new house he and his family were building. In the middle of crunching numbers for the house, he suddenly remembered my Kickstarter project and that he hadn't given to it yet. He said he went to my Kickstarter page and saw where I was in relation to my goal. As he sat there and prayed about it, he told me later, he felt so strongly that God was telling him how much he had been blessed and that he needed to give this amount. He said God was so present in that room that he knew exactly what he had to do. Wow, tell me God didn't have this all orchestrated! He gave his pledge with only 10 hours left in my all-or-nothing campaign. God is so good, and I'm forever grateful to the wonderful people who made the CD project a reality.

"You're the touch I can't forget, the song that's in my head, every day and night I don't know why." In the bridge we tried to come up with those things that haunt us, those things that, once they get in our heads, we can't let them go—the

exact way I want God to be in my life. I want him to haunt me and stay with me like a song that gets stuck in my head. We've all experienced those times when we hear a song on the radio and we keep singing it all day long. We try to shut it off, but the music keeps playing on and on. It feels like it's impossible to stop! I want God to be like that for me. I long

for His presence to be that real and constant in my life. So many times it isn't, but those days when I feel utterly surrendered to His will and can't take my mind off Him, days when His beautiful music keeps playing over and over in my head . . . those are the best days of my life. Those are the days I know I'm a tiny bit closer to where God

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And I know He longs for me because He says in Deuteronomy 6:15, “For the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you.” God is jealous for us, just like a lover. Earlier in Deuteronomy (6:5), we are commanded to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Later on in the Bible, Jesus tells us that this is the greatest commandment of them all. If we don’t do anything else right, we are called to love God right. This is not an ancillary job for us. It is to be our main job and calling.

Because God longs so much for our love, He pursues us, never gives up on us, can’t get enough of us. It’s hard to wrap your mind around the depth of that kind of love, especially when human love can be so fleeting. Perhaps you’ve never experienced real love, even from a parent. Maybe you could never do enough for your mom and your dad was too busy working and providing for the family to notice that you were even there. There are so many sad stories about the ways love—and the lack of it—have wounded us. So many scars that need healing. Instead of disappointment and disapproval, what if we could feel God’s deep, intimate love? What if our hearts could be on fire with passion from and for our heavenly Father? Using that kind of imagery may make you a little uncomfortable, but Jesus calls himself the bridegroom (Matthew 9:15, Matthew 25:1-10, and John 3:29). We are the bride, and He tells us that we are lovely—exactly what He was looking for! We are beautiful because of the cross!

It goes back to that intimacy that we share with our lovers, our husbands. It’s the truest form of intimacy, and it’s what God is calling us to. When you can get past the initial weirdness of it all, the thought of God as a lover is a very beautiful image. To me it’s much better than the image many of us grew up with, the mental picture of a stern man with a long, gray beard pointing his finger at us as he points out everything we have done wrong. I’d much rather picture

God as someone who loves me for me and longs to be close to me and will pursue me till the end of time, than someone who heaps shame and guilt on me.

A God of love provides comfort when I feel like no one else truly “gets” me or loves me as deeply as this very emotional, creative person needs and longs to be loved.

So in the end, I guess, being haunted is a good thing!



This Mother's Love



Words and Music by Jill Miller

*Wasn't it yesterday you were running out to play
And I'd tell you, Son, stay close to home
From our kitchen sink I'd watch you close and always think
About how fast you were growing
Now all this time's flown by and here we are saying goodbye
I'm not sure I can let you go
You're off to chase your dreams, become a man, be a Marine
Lord, it scares me so*

*Take my love with you
Let it be a rock that you can hold on to
So no matter where you are
We'll never really be apart
'Cuz you'll have a heart full of this mother's love, this mother's
love*

*Each and every day I'll be on my knees and I will pray
Lord, be with him, keep him safe*

*So much I feel inside, fear and worry, yet so much pride
So I'll just hold on to faith*

*Take my love with you
Let it be a rock that you can hold on to
So no matter where you are
We'll never really be apart
'Cuz you'll have a heart full of this mother's love, this mother's
love
This mother's love
There's so much love, this mother's love*

Wasn't it yesterday you were running out to play?



Motherhood is a wonderful, awe-inspiring gift from God. Abraham Lincoln said, "All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother." I also absolutely love this quote from J.D. Salinger: "Mothers are all slightly insane."⁸ So true!

It's an amazing job, a life-changing job, and truly the greatest job on earth. But my journey was a little different from the typical path to motherhood. To tell my story, we actually need to go back to my elementary school days.

I am the youngest of six kids, and there are five girls and one boy in my family. Obviously I learned a lot from my older sisters, not usually in what they said directly to me, but in my careful observation of their unfolding lives. They were my older sisters, and they were so cool!

One memory that stands out clearly to me is the day my sister Barb came over, along with her husband Mark, to announce to Mom and Dad and the rest of the family that they were pregnant. This was

going to be the first grandbaby in a house that loved children. This was joyous news, and everyone was incredibly excited. I remember looking at Barb and thinking that she literally glowed. She was so happy, and I was thrilled at the idea of being an aunt at such a young age.

As Barb's pregnancy progressed, and her tummy started growing, I was in awe of the way her body was changing. Sure, I had seen pregnant women before this, but it's different when it's your sister and you're really paying attention. I instinctively knew that I was witnessing a miracle. This was a new life growing in her body, and the whole thing amazed me. I would even go so far as to put pillows under my shirt and pretend that I had a big tummy, like Barb, and look at myself in the mirror when no one was watching. I dreamed about what it would be like, how it would feel to have a baby growing inside of me. It was an incredible miracle I was watching take place in Barb, and that's when I came to the conclusion, which I still believe to be true, that pregnant women really are the most beautiful women on earth. I couldn't wait to be pregnant someday.

There were lots more pregnancies to go through as Peggy and Linda quickly followed Barb, and we became a baby-making family. It seemed like someone was pregnant pretty much all the time, and Mom and Dad loved every minute of it. I got to babysit a lot, and I especially loved the newborns. I loved the way they smelled and the way they slept in your arms. Precious. Needless to say, I knew I wanted to have kids someday. I wasn't one of those people who considered going childless. I knew my future husband would have to want a family as well.

Fast-forward to my twenties. I'm married, and we are enjoying our life with two incomes and no kids. We were traveling a lot and having a great time, but I started to get restless. Some of our married friends started having kids, and I knew it was time to start a family. Jim agreed, and I went off birth control, expecting to be pregnant in

six months or less. That seemed to be how long it took everyone else.

Well, six months came and went and another six months came and went. I was still not pregnant. I made an appointment with my doctor, and my long and painful journey through infertility began. My physicians started running tests, and I had my first laparoscopy, where they discovered the problem. I had endometriosis, which makes it harder to get pregnant. I didn't have "a ton of it," they said, so they removed what I had and told me that I should then be able to get pregnant. This was great news, and my hope was renewed.

Another six months or so went by, and nothing happened. I started

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to get really worried. I had many more procedures and surgeries and was on lots of different fertility drugs, but the bottom line was, I wasn't getting pregnant, no matter what we tried. I was also in an intense amount of pain from the infertility drugs, the endometriosis, and the many cysts that kept forming on my ovaries. It was pretty much a nightmare. I would be late with my period, thinking, *Maybe this is it! Maybe I'm pregnant!* And then I would

get my period and *whammo!*—the pain would hit like a knife. It started to feel as if God was punishing me. I didn't know for what, but I just felt as though He was mad at me about something.

The grief was unbearable, and very few people really understood what I was going through. I got tons of very annoying advice, like, "Adopt a child, and then you'll get pregnant." And my personal favorite: "You're just trying too hard." Exactly how do you *try too hard*? I never understood that one. Was I doing something to mess my

body up? Luckily, I had a few good friends who understood and would listen to me over and over again as I wrestled with this issue. The tears seemed as though they would never stop, and the quest to become pregnant became all-consuming.

I continued praying to God, sure that His only possible answer was for me to get pregnant, but it felt like He wasn't listening. My faith was being severely challenged, and I was beginning to lose hope that prayers could ever make a difference. I kept praying anyway.

Just as we were starting to look at in vitro, our last-ditch effort, we got a completely unexpected call from a friend who told us that her niece was pregnant and that she wanted to give her baby up for adoption. This young woman was only 18 and knew that she was not ready to be a mother. Our friend knew all about our struggles with infertility and wondered if we would be interested in adopting her baby. We said "Yes!" instantly.

The birth mom wanted what's called an "open" adoption, which means that the birthparents and adoptive parents meet and have contact with each other. We set up a meeting when she was about three months along. This was basically an interview to see if she wanted us to raise her baby, but it was nothing like any interview I had ever been through. I was scared to death. Would she like us? Would she hate us? Would she pick us, or would my heart be broken again?

The birth mom came to Sioux City, and we met at our friend's house. I will never forget the first time I saw her. It's one of those moments emblazoned in my memory. She took one look at Jim, started laughing, and said, "Oh, my gosh. You look just like the baby's father." We instantly knew that this was meant to be. We spent the night talking about everything under the sun, and we hit it off wonderfully. She has a keen sense of humor, and Jim does too, so they bantered back and forth with ease. I felt a strange connection to her as well, and we left knowing that we were the ones she wanted to adopt her baby. I was elated! I would finally be a mother!

The next six months were full of anticipation and lots of worry as well. The birth mom was in the driver's seat, and we really had no control. We started our home study, the police background check, and all the things required when you adopt. The whole process felt like adding injury to insult when I thought about all the scrutiny we went through to make sure we were fit to be parents when so many people go out and get pregnant right and left without any home studies or background checks of any kind. This was yet another obstacle we had to overcome, and it all seemed quite unfair, to be honest. Yet we plowed along because we knew we wanted this baby.

As the mom's due date approached, I flew out East, to Vermont, to be with her for the delivery. She had graciously said that she wanted me there for the birth, and I was thrilled to have the opportunity. The birth mom and I had become extremely close the previous six months during our weekly telephone calls, so she wanted me there for moral support as well. This was all well and good, but the thing that kept running through my mind was, *What if she changes her mind? What if she sees that baby and can't give him or her up?* That exact thing had happened to a friend of mine who was supposed to adopt a baby. Hers was an open adoption as well, and everything seemed set in stone; the birth mother was set on adoption. My friend and her husband were there right after the birth and spent a couple of days with the baby and his mother, and everything seemed fine. The adoption was moving forward as planned.

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There was a waiting period in the state where the baby was born before the baby could go home with the adoptive parents, so the baby had to be placed in foster care during that time. My friends came home to anxiously await the time to return and take home their baby. Unfortunately, the birth mother changed her mind a few days after they got home and decided to keep the baby. My friends, of course, were devastated, especially since they had held the baby and bonded with him, thinking he was going to be their son. It was a horrible situation, and I felt so much sympathy for them.

I kept going over their story in my mind the whole time I was in Vermont. Would the same thing happen to us? Would she change her mind once she saw her baby? I wanted to be there, but I was also a little guarded. I didn't want to get hurt any more, and didn't think I could handle one more disappointment on my road to motherhood.

Well, the day finally arrived when Christopher was born. I was right there in the delivery room, along with the birth mother's mom, and it was the most incredible thing I have ever witnessed. It was amazing! I drank in every moment that I could, all the time trying to be very aware of the birth mother's mom and their relationship. I didn't want to intrude, and I knew how blessed I was to have the opportunity to be there at all.

Jim flew out the next day, and the only way I can say it is that we were cautiously overjoyed. We thought the birth mother was firm in her desire to give Christopher to us . . . all the time knowing, however, that she had the ultimate decision. We had absolutely no rights, and the ball was in her court.

We hadn't worked out all the details of our arrangement, but we had assumed we would take Christopher with us when he was discharged from the hospital. The birth mother had other plans. She told us, "You guys will have him for the rest of his life. I want him for the weekend." Gulp! Here we go.

I was heartbroken and scared beyond words. I thought, This is it.

We're never going to get him now. She told us she would meet us at the courthouse on Monday for the relinquishment hearing, and that would be that. There was nothing we could do. We had no voice in the matter.

We went to our hotel, and I absolutely broke down. I couldn't quit crying, thinking, *After all we've been through: the infertility and all the ups and downs we had with the adoption process . . . and now it's going to be for nothing. It's over. She'll never relinquish her rights after she spends the weekend with him.* I felt as though I was going crazy, but I kept praying and praying that she would go through with it. "Please, God, don't break my heart again!"

We kept ourselves busy throughout the weekend, sightseeing and exploring Vermont. It was beautiful and helped keep me sane, but my stomach was in a constant state of upset. The days drug by no matter how much we tried to fill them. We tried not to talk about it because it was just too painful for both of us. Finally Monday morning came, and we headed to the courthouse.

To our relief, she showed up with Christopher and her mom, and the hearing went smoothly. She signed the papers relinquishing her rights as the mother. We breathed a huge sigh of relief. That relief was short-lived, however. The judge explained that the birth mother had 24 hours to change her mind, so we couldn't leave town until the next day. We had known this ahead of time and had not scheduled our flight home until that following day.

When we left the courtroom, we assumed, again, that we would be taking Christopher with us to our hotel for the night. But the birth mother told us she would meet us at the airport with him. She wanted one more night with him. Wow! To say that I was a wreck is an understatement. I couldn't believe it, but again we had no say in the matter. She was in control, and we were just along for the ride. And what a ride it was. So once again we went to our hotel and watched the minutes painfully tick away.

There were many legal issues along the way that I haven't gotten into, but one pressing one at this point was a little thing called the Interstate Compact. Every state has its own Interstate Compact laws regarding adoption, varying waiting periods, different hoops to jump through, and more. To make things even more complicated, Christopher was born in Vermont, his birth father lived in New Hampshire, and we lived in South Dakota at the time. Consequently, we had to satisfy the requirements of all three states before we could bring Christopher home, so this made for a logistical nightmare.

South Dakota, having such a small population, had only one person who could approve the Interstate Compact requirements enabling us to come home. We couldn't legally come into the state without approval from this office. Unfortunately, the one person in South Dakota who could approve our adoption was on vacation at the time, and the office told us we had to wait until they were back from vacation to get approval to come home with Christopher. I usually don't get too upset with people, but I was at the end of my rope. I let them know in no uncertain terms that I was coming home the next day with my baby and they would find someone who could approve the Interstate Compact. They said they would do what they could and let us know. Great!

We didn't sleep much, if at all, that night, not knowing if that Interstate Compact would come through or if the birth mother would indeed show up at the airport. So many unknowns, and everything was completely out of our hands. I spent the entire night praying, not knowing what God's will would be in the situation, and so afraid that it might be that the birth mother would want to keep her son. That was a definite possibility, and I knew I had to accept this if it was God's will. Sleep eluded me.

The next morning we packed up and headed to the airport, unsure if we would be flying home with Christopher or flying home empty-handed. When we got to the airport, we checked in with our

airline and waited. The birth mother wasn't there. Our flight was getting closer . . . and still she wasn't there. My heart sank; I thought I would be sick. It seemed my worst nightmare was coming true.

All of a sudden we got a page over the airport intercom asking us to come to a certain desk for a phone call. My heart sank even deeper, and I thought the worst. However, it was someone calling from the Interstate Compact office in South Dakota telling us that we had approval to come home.

Awesome! Now we just needed a baby.

As we were walking back to our waiting area, there she was. The birth mother was there, along with her mother, and she had Christopher with her. I have never felt a greater sense of relief in all my life. We visited a bit, and she clung to him. The pain in her eyes was

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so real, and I will never forget taking him from her arms. She was crying uncontrollably, and we were too. I was witness to the most unselfish act a human being can ever do. She put her feelings to the side and did what was best for her son. She knew it was the right thing, she wanted him to have a better life than she could give him, and she loved him enough to give him up. It tore her heart out, but

she stood firm to what God was calling her to do. It was incredibly beautiful, but so painful at the same time.

As I'm writing this, I can't stop crying as I think about it. Christopher is 22 years old now, yet this moment feels like it was yesterday. It is something I will truly never forget, and a gift that I can't begin to thank the birth mother for. I admire her courage and her willingness to follow God's will, even at immense personal cost. I don't think I was that strong in my faith at her age, and I don't know that I would

ever have been able to be that unselfish. She is a remarkable woman and she showed me God's love in action.

So that's a really long story to get me to this wonderful job of motherhood. Finally, after years and years of hoping and waiting, I was a mother. Our tears of sadness for the incredible sacrifice we had just witnessed turned to tears of joy on the plane as we were finally on our way home with our baby. After a long and painful journey, I was a mother, and we were a family. When we arrived in Sioux City, we had a huge crowd of family and friends waiting to greet us at the airport. Tears were flowing as everyone gathered around to get a look at our beautiful new son. They all knew the long road we had taken to get to this point, and everyone was thrilled to share our joy. Psalm 113:9 says, "He settles

the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the Lord." That was finally true for us, and I was ecstatic!

Now the real work of being a mother began—something that should be so natural but is also very daunting. I had gone through so much to get this child, now I felt as if I had to do it perfectly. I felt an overwhelming sense of duty to the birth mother to give her son the best possible shot in the world. "Lord, please don't let me screw this up!"

But as all you mothers know, it's not nearly as easy as it looks. It's very easy to know exactly what to do when you're an onlooker. When you are the one making all the decisions, it's totally different. You realize very quickly that this isn't a drill, this is real life. This is a precious little life that lies in your arms.

Christopher was colicky, which didn't help matters. He also had

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some sensory issues that I noticed from birth. He could take up to two hours to drink his bottle, and I had to bounce him in just the right manner for him to eat. It was a challenge, and I felt incredibly unprepared. I realize, however, that every new mother feels this way. We can read Dr. Spock and go to classes (although as an adoptive mother there were no baby classes that I knew about!), but when it's a real, live baby it's a different story. I quickly learned that what might have worked for my nieces and nephews was not going to work for Christopher. He had his own needs, and it was my job to figure out how to meet his needs. He was unique and challenging at times, but I hoped I was up to the task.

I know I failed many, many times, but I can truly say I tried with all my heart to be the best mother I could be. I believe most of us moms feel the same way. We know we mess up, but we try so hard to give our precious children the best of everything. We do the best with what we have, and we grieve over every mistake that we make.

I know I made plenty of mistakes, but I also knew at the time that Christopher had some issues going on. He was not a "normal" child. I knew it from birth. He didn't like to be cuddled too much, and he had these eating issues that continued into his toddler years. Food was a huge issue for most of his life, until his teen years. Once he got off the bottle, he lived on ham and cheese for many, many years. And the ham had to be cut up a certain way or he wouldn't touch it. I tried all the things I was told to do to get him to eat other foods, but none of them worked. He sat at the table for hours not touching the things I put on his plate, and I finally realized that it would work itself out. His eating habits bothered his grandparents a lot more than they bothered me, because I knew I had done all I could to try to handle the problem, but to no avail.

Christopher had issues in school, was diagnosed with AD/HD, and some underlying issues identified in first grade as well. His pre-school and kindergarten teachers had both talked to me about so-

cialization issues that he had and attention issues, but of course I didn't want to hear it. He was my son, and he was perfect. I knew in my heart, however, that something wasn't quite right. When he was in first grade, we took him to Iowa City, to the University of Iowa, for a battery of tests. A team of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and educators evaluated him. At the end of the day, they gave us a diagnosis of AD/HD and Asperger's Syndrome, which is a form of high-functioning autism. Suddenly there was a reason for his odd behavior. It wasn't just bad parenting on my part, as I was beginning to feel. I had had more than one person give me "that look," the one that said, "You're a bad parent. Get your kid under control." It was comforting in some ways to get a diagnosis and a reason for his behaviors, but it was devastating at the same time to realize that there really was something "wrong" with my child.

Being the pro-active person that I am, I attacked his diagnosis with a vengeance. I learned all I could about AD/HD and Asperger's. I read books and I attended conferences that were actually meant for teachers and educators, with very few parents in attendance. I needed to know how best to help him. We went to occupational therapists, to speech therapists, and finally ended up with a one-on-one aide for him at school. He was very smart, which is typical of Asperger's kids, but he needed help getting through school and focusing on the work. He also needed lots of help with social skills.

Everyday life held many challenges for us. Getting Christopher off to school often left me in tears. He would have a total meltdown about not wanting to go to school, and it was a fight almost every day to get him out the door. He had lots of meltdowns, and I had to learn to do a "hold" technique on him so he wouldn't destroy things. He would get so upset that he would throw things in his room or try to scratch and hurt himself. It was incredibly distressing to watch, and I felt so helpless. I had to learn how to keep him safe and be as calm as possible. I quickly realized that the more excited and upset I got,

the more upset he got. It's hard to stay calm when you are watching your 10-year-old freak out.

When he was 12, disaster struck our family—his dad left the marriage. Christopher was devastated, but he didn't talk much about it. He kept it locked inside. I was scared to death. I had no idea how I would handle these behavior issues on my own. It was terrifying, yet I somehow felt God's presence all around me.

As we went through the divorce, I somehow kept my sanity. When I started dating my second husband, John, I saw relief on the horizon. Christopher's therapist had mentioned to me many times that what Christopher needed most in his life was a strong male figure, and John was just that. A former professional rodeo cowboy, John is as manly and strong as you can get. Physically he was strong; but also, emotionally, he was incredibly strong and grounded. When he said something he meant it, and Christopher quickly picked up on that and was drawn to John right away. They formed a fast friendship.

John and I were married a year after we started dating, and both my boys were very excited about the marriage. When John asked me, I said, "Yes, but I have to OK it with my kids first!" I had a long talk with my boys about John and his two boys, Jared and Jason, and both Christopher and Sam were 100 percent behind it. They loved John, and they were excited about getting two new brothers. They saw how happy I was and how much John and I loved each other, and that made them happy. I guess the old saying is true: "If Mama's happy,

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everybody's happy." I was definitely a happy person because I was entering a marriage where Jesus Christ was going to be at the center. (But more about that later in this book!)

We got married on the beach in Maui at sunset with our four boys with us, an absolutely perfect day. I couldn't have pictured it any more beautiful than it was. Everyone was so excited about this union, and we started seeing some major changes in Christopher. He started talking more and coming out of his shell. He went to high school without his one-on-one aide, which was a huge step. He also made a decision his junior year to go off all of his medications because he wanted to join the Marines upon graduation, and he knew that you couldn't be on medication for two years before you went to boot camp. He was going to be ready!

Although he was doing much better, there were still some major bumps along the way. In high school he got his first girlfriend. Christopher was doing much better with his family, but he was still not in the "typical" social circles at school. He was still a loner, wore mostly black, and his few friends were kids on the fringes. He didn't fit in with the popular crowd or the jocks. When he got a girlfriend, he fell hard and fast.

Of course, his girlfriend was on the fringes as well. She dressed gothic and practiced Satanism. How is that for being on the fringes? Here I am, a Christian singer, and my son is into Satanism. To put it mildly, I freaked out! I didn't know what to do. This was not the picture I had in mind for my precious son, and I, of course, blamed myself. What had I done wrong? Here I was entrusted with this child, and I've totally screwed him up!

I didn't know any of these details about the girlfriend at the time because I never actually met her. Christopher kept her from me because he knew that I wouldn't approve. But all of a sudden we started noticing a change in his behavior for the worse. He started listening to Marilyn Manson, Slipknot, and other death metal groups, and

the music just made him angrier and angrier. He started writing all kinds of dark, creepy words and sayings on his boom box, his notebooks, and his arms. I had to constantly tell him to wash his arms off. I felt like I was losing him.

Being a musician, I didn't know how to handle the music thing. My first response was to let it go; he needed the freedom to express himself. John felt totally different and wanted to destroy every CD from the beginning. I resisted and hoped and prayed that it would just be a short-lived phase. Unfortunately, it just got worse. He got more and more into the music, and his attitude got darker and darker. We knew we had to put a stop to it. John made the decision to go out to his car and break all of his CDs. Christopher was furious and threatened to run away. I was incredibly scared, but I knew it was the right course. We had to stop this and now!

I thought I was going to lose him then, and I felt like this was the biggest failure of my life. How could this have happened in *my* home? He grew up with a Mom who has always had a strong faith and practiced that faith consistently. I have always taken him to church and Sunday school. I've prayed with him and read Bible stories to him. He has heard the Gospel his whole life, so how could this be? How could I have let this darkness get into his mind? I was scared, literally scared, for his soul, and I was on my knees daily in prayer for him. I pleaded with God to protect him from Satan's clutches.

Once we took the music away, the anger started lessening and

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things started changing. The odd behaviors started going away. His mood started improving. He started becoming more and more social. John was relentless and wouldn't put up with any of it, so if he tried to sneak a CD back in, John was there, breaking it in two. Christopher quickly learned that John meant what he said and would follow through on it. This music was not allowed in our house. I knew he still wasn't a believer in Christ, but I felt as though my son was at least out of the war zone.

His junior and senior years were a little smoother. He started getting more and more social at school, mainly with teachers, but it was a start. He was making eye contact with people, and that was a huge change. He started coming out of his shell, and other people were starting to notice this amazing kid that I always knew was there.

The thing is, Christopher and I have always shared a very special bond. I guess all mothers do with their children, especially with their sons, but this one seemed a little different. I had spent so much of my time trying to get him through life. I quit my job when he was five years old to focus on my family, and that was largely to help Christopher. I knew he needed extra attention

that I would not be able to give him if I was working. I went to seminars, read books, and tried many different treatments to find the best way to help him cope with his issues.

I also spent countless hours in prayer for him and Sam. I waffled between feeling as if motherhood was the best job on the planet and feeling like a total loser.

On days when it would be a battle to get him off to school, I would cry on the drive home and pray continually for God's guidance and help. I felt as if I was drowning at times, and worry was an ongoing battle. Why had God given me a son like this—to me, a person who

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struggles with consistency (something Christopher really needed!)? Here I was, a person who was incredibly social in school, trying to understand someone who didn't have any interest in having friends. It was so foreign to me. Yet I knew in my heart of hearts I was meant to be his mother, and so I plowed on, mistakes and all.

As hard as I tried, I felt unfit for the job of motherhood so many times. I still do sometimes, but I have learned one thing on my journey: most mothers feel exactly the same way, at least the ones I've talked to. We all want the very best for our kids, but there's no "how to" book that comes with each child. And each precious child is so different. I know my kids are adopted, so their biological makeup is different, but I've seen it with my nieces and nephews and my friends' kids. Even in the same biological family each child is unique, and what works for one won't work for another. Granted, there are basic things that go across the board with raising kids, but the little nuances are where I believe we all struggle. How do I reach a kid who is introverted and shy? How do I encourage my child to try new things when he is overly cautious? How do I give my son the self-confidence he needs when he is naturally incredibly hard on himself? There are so many questions, and the answers that work for other people don't always work for you.

Well, back to Christopher, because that's really what this story is about. Christopher had different passions throughout his life, and he would hyper-focus on one passion at a time. He would obsess about the most current passion. His first obsession in life was Thomas the Train. He watched Thomas the Train movies, played with Thomas the Train toys, and would have me read Thomas the Train books from the age of about two to five. He loved it and didn't have interest in much else, besides Legos. Legos were a constant throughout his childhood. At around the age of five, he discovered *Star Wars*, and that became his obsession for the next four years or so. I can't even count how many times I watched the *Star Wars* movies with

him, and he had every Star Wars Lego set that was made, I think. He was obsessed. They say that kids with Asperger's hyper-focus on one thing at a time, and this was definitely true with Christopher.

In about fourth or fifth grade Christopher's obsession changed to World War II. He wanted to know all the facts about the battles, the weapons and ammunition used, all the tiny, minute details that his Asperger's mind thrived on. All this quickly led to his resolve to join the Marines Corps. From fifth grade on, that's what he was going to do, and that never, ever changed.

Christopher turned 18 the summer before his senior year. On his 18th birthday, Christopher, his Dad, and I went to the recruiter's office, and Christopher signed up for the Marine Corps. His dream was finally here, and it was the first thing we did on his birthday. He couldn't go to boot camp until he finished high school, but he wanted to sign up the absolute first day that he could. The dream from fifth grade on had not dimmed in the least. He spent his senior year as a "Poolee," where he went once a month to mini drills or workouts that the recruiters held to try and prepare the students for boot camp, and he anxiously awaited the day when he could finally start his path to becoming a Marine.

He knew more facts about the Marines than most of the recruiters did and more facts about World War II than some of his history teachers. I'll never forget the time he came home from school and told me that they had a date wrong in their history book at school. It was some obscure battle during World War II, and the date in the book was wrong. Christopher brought it to the attention of his teacher, who dismissed it at first, but Christopher later proved it to him, and the teacher realized he was right; the date in the book was wrong. These are the kind of details that matter to a mind with Asperger's.

Christopher, along with my stepson, Jason, graduated in May 2010. It was a great day as we watched two of our sons receive their diplomas. We had made it through school, which seemed like a ma-

jor milestone and something we thought we might not be able to accomplish at different points in time. Two weeks later, Christopher was scheduled to leave for boot camp.

The time quickly came for us to head to Omaha to go through his final round of medical tests, and then he would hop on a flight sometime the next day. He was at the foothills of his dream, but I knew he had a huge mountain to climb. Christopher is small—he's only five-foot-three—and at that time he weighed about 120 pounds. I was well aware of the fact that they don't make accommodations for size in the Marines. Everyone carries the exact same backpack with the exact same amount of weight. I also knew that they pick on the smaller ones especially hard because they have to make sure they are up to the rigors of being a Marine. I knew he was in for the fight of his life, and I also knew that I wouldn't be able to talk to him for the next thirteen weeks.

As we hung out at the medical facility in Omaha, we watched all the other branches leave for their respective boot camps with backpacks, cell phones, and computers in hand. Marines leave with absolutely nothing—other than their ID and \$20. That is all they are allowed to take with them. The other branches also get to call home every so often, but not the Marines. We were told that they now belonged to the United States Marines Corps, and they were government assets. Mom was nobody! Reality set in!

As we said a tearful good-bye at the airport, so many emotions ran through my head. Here was the kid that I had had such a tight

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grip on his whole life; I monitored his every move and kept a keen eye on him always, and now I had to let that control go. He was on his own, and there was no way for me to know how he was doing, other than a few handwritten letters he might write. It was time for him to spread his wings and fly.

This is the day all mothers work toward, whether our children go off to boot camp or college or life. They all have to leave us someday, and it's a scary thing. How do you suddenly let go of someone you have nurtured and cared for for 18 years or more? It isn't easy, but we have to do it.

This Mother's Love



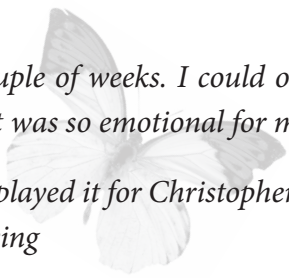
Where I was when this song came to me: As I was preparing for Christopher and Jason to graduate from high school, I was sitting in my music room thinking about all the changes that would be coming. Christopher would be going off to boot camp, and Jason would be starting his life out as well. Two of our four boys were leaving at one time, and it was going to leave a big hole in my heart.

Month, year written: May 2010

How long it took me to write: A couple of weeks. I could only work on it so long at a time because it was so emotional for me.

When I just knew I 'had it': When I played it for Christopher in my music room and we were both crying

Anything else fun or noteworthy about "This Mother's Love"? We had a going away party for Christopher before he left for boot camp, and I sang it for friends and family. There wasn't a dry eye in the room! When I sing this song out, I have everyone in the



audience who has served in the military in the past or is presently serving stand up. We then give them a round of applause for their service. It's always very touching and moving to see people's reactions and how thankful they are to be recognized for their tremendous sacrifice. I definitely have a new appreciation for the beautiful freedom we enjoy in this country and the brave men and women who have sacrificed to give us that freedom. I also have a new appreciation for the families they leave behind.

Later that night, I got my one phone call from him, which is a call that they get to make from the Marines Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego. They read a scripted message, and it's about ten seconds long. My call came at 1:15 in the morning, and it went pretty much like this: "This is Private Christopher Avery reporting that I have arrived safely in San Diego and have begun my Marine Corps training. I love you." Click. I could barely hear him because there was so much screaming and yelling going on in the background. The drill instructors had already started their verbal tirades.

I hung up the phone and cried for a good hour. I remember pacing around my house in the dark, asking God to be with him and get him through this. It was such a huge dream of his, and I was so scared he wouldn't make it. I also couldn't get the screaming I had heard out of my head, and I knew this was going to be his life for the next thirteen weeks.

As the old saying goes, no news is good news, and that's especially true with boot camp. They told us the only time you will get a call from them is if your recruit has quit or been kicked out. We didn't get a call, so I knew he was still OK. Three or four weeks into it, we received our first letter. I held my breath as I opened my treasure. I read it over and over and called John and read it to him on the

phone. Christopher was OK! It was hard, but he was doing it. I wrote him back immediately because I finally had an address to write to. They won't give you the address ahead of time, so you have to wait for your recruit to send you a letter to be able to write them. I wrote as often as I could, and I received a surprising number of letters back. Some were hard to read because he was explaining how hard it was, but we didn't get a call that he was coming home, so I knew Christopher was still OK.

One Sunday afternoon, about ten or eleven weeks into the three-month period, my cell phone rang while showing an unknown area code. I quickly realized it was California, and my heart sank. "Oh, no! This is it! He's done; he's coming home. He's so close, but he just couldn't keep going." I said hello with a small, timid voice, not wanting to hear what the person on the other end of the line had to say.

I was greeted on the phone by a man who quickly introduced himself as Jim, and he said: "Christopher is OK. He wants you to know that he is doing OK." Huge sigh of relief. I was able to breathe again! Jim then went on to tell me that he is a pastor at the military base, and he conducts worship services for the recruits in boot camp. Christopher had gone to his service that day, and this pastor did an altar call where he invited any of the recruits who wanted to receive Christ as their personal Savior to come up right then and there and be baptized. Christopher had come forward and was baptized that day! Tears of joy flooded my eyes, and I was overwhelmed with emotion. My son who had once dabbled in Satanism was now going to be with me in eternity! My biggest prayer for him was answered!

Pastor Jim and I chatted for a bit, and the pastor said that Christopher had talked a lot about me after the church service. He told him I was involved in music ministry and talked about my different CDs. Jim said, "He sure loves his mom, and you've done a great job with him." Wow, was I hearing this right? All those years of struggle and conflict had given way to a day celebration! Life for Christopher was

truly just beginning!

My most ardent prayer for all four of my boys is that they know Jesus in a personal way, that faith is the foundation of their lives. Nothing else really matters, not their jobs or their schooling or their bank accounts. I just want to know that they will be with me in paradise. This phone call let me know that Christopher would be there with me, and I was overjoyed.

The next few weeks flew by as we prepared to go out to California for Christopher's graduation ceremony. I was actually going to be able to hug my baby again, and I was extremely excited to say the least. There were a dozen of us that went out for it, and it was the most awe-inspiring ceremony I have ever witnessed. The pageantry and patriotism on display made us realize the awesome privilege it is to live in such a great country. I also had a clearer picture of the sacrifices the brave men and women have made who have fought for our precious freedom.

Once the ceremony was over, we raced onto the parade grounds to find our Marine. That hug was probably the best hug of my life! He looked so good and was so proud of all he had accomplished. He had made it! He had done something few people have done, and he had overcome great odds to do it. I could not have been prouder.

So when I went to write this song, I wanted Christopher and my other boys to know that no matter where they go in life, my love goes with them. We may be separated by miles, we may be separated by

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circumstances, we may be separated by conflict, but that love will be with them always. It's nonnegotiable. It will never change. And it will be a rock that they can hold on to forever.



A New Sunrise



Words and Music by Jill Miller

*Close your eyes and just imagine, picture a brand new day
Where people come together to make a better way
Working for something greater than we alone could ever create*

*I see a world full of love and mercy, arms open wide
A graceful, loving spirit coming alive
I see a new sunrise*

*People with conviction are impossible to contain
When we start believing we become the winds of change
The dream is all we're seeing as the spark becomes a flame*

*I see a world full of love and mercy, arms open wide
A graceful, loving spirit coming alive
I see a new sunrise*

*You can tell me I'm a dreamer and I guess that's probably true
But I'll never stop believing that there is good in me and you*

Sometimes we need a little bit of help to break through

*I see a world full of love and mercy, arms open wide
A graceful, loving spirit coming alive
I see a new sunrise*



We've all heard of Pollyanna. Pollyanna was a sweet character in a book who was always able to find something to be happy about as she approached life by playing "The Glad Game." The novel's success brought the "Pollyanna principle" into our culture, a way of describing someone who always seems able to find something to be "glad" about no matter what circumstances arise. It is sometimes used in a pejorative way, referring to someone whose optimism is excessive to the point of naïveté or refusing to accept the facts of an unfortunate situation. This pejorative use can be heard in the introduction to the 1930 George and Ira Gershwin song, "But Not For Me": *I never want to hear from any cheerful Pollyannas who tell me fate supplies a mate, that's all bananas.*

I've been called Pollyanna a few times in my life, often in that pejorative sense, and I've found myself defending the fact that I'm basically an optimistic person. Is that so bad? Is it wrong to find the good in things? I don't think so, but I do admit that this word applies to me more accurately in the fact that I can be incredibly naïve. I want to believe the best about people, always. I have an innate need to give everyone a chance, to always root for the underdog, and I hate seeing people bullied or left out. Always have. It probably stems from the fact that I have always hated feeling like I'm left out.

Since, at my core, I'm an optimistic person, it stands to reason that when I heard about Sunrise Retirement Community, a local nonprofit that I partner with, launching a capital campaign with the

theme “A New Sunrise,” I instantly thought of it as a song title. That’s something I knew I could write, a song about positive things going on in the world. It’s hard to find those positive things sometimes in today’s world when the news is filled with school shootings, a struggling economy, corrupt politicians, and all the social ills we face as a nation. My sister Kathy always gets on me because I don’t watch the news very much, and I have to admit that often I don’t. I’m trying to get better at it because I know I need to be more informed and I can’t keep my head in the sand. But the thing is, so much of what gets reported is depressing and negative. I wish the media would report on more of the positive things going on in the world, but I realize that positive things don’t sell as well as the negative things do. The grit and grime are what people want to hear, and it seems the more shocking the story, the better.

Anyway, to really tell the story behind this song, I feel like I need to start at the beginning and explain how my relationship with Sunrise Retirement Community began. My dad suffered a stroke in 1991 at the age of 63. At first it didn’t appear the stroke was that severe, and he had very little residual paralysis. He seemed to bounce back physically fairly quickly. After that, however, we noticed that his mind continued to deteriorate. Over the next couple of years, he started forgetting things, started exhibiting some disturbing behaviors, started getting lost when driving in very familiar areas of town, and things progressively got worse. After a trip to the Mayo Clinic, we finally discovered that he was having a number of small strokes, and these strokes were causing a condition called multi-infarct dementia, a condition similar to Alzheimer’s.

Dad’s descent into dementia was a slow and painful process. His condition worsened over the next five years to the point where he had no language and could not communicate in any way. He could not be left alone at all and needed to have care 24 hours a day. My mother was a saint and took wonderful care of him, but finally, after

much prompting from all of us kids, she knew it was time for help and that Dad had to receive more care than she could provide on her own. That's where Sunrise came in. Dad went into their Bernstein Unit, a dementia unit. What a wonderful facility, filled with compassionate people who cared for him. My family will forever be grateful for the care and dignity they gave Dad right up to the end of his life.

The saddest part for my family about those four years when Dad was living at Sunrise was watching him slowly slip further and further away. Because he had no language, there was no way to know what was going on inside his head. Was he uncomfortable? Was

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he hungry? Did he remember who any of us were? Did he understand the words we were saying to him? All of these were questions without answers. The worst part for me was the way he stared at me with a blank look in his eyes. Dad's eyes always had a twinkle in them, especially when he smiled his great, big smile. Now his eyes were cold and lifeless. It was painful to watch the man who was always strong and physically fit, full of life, wither away. We would all talk to him like everything was OK,

but we always wondered if any of it was getting through. I usually left Sunrise in tears, and to be honest, I often questioned God on why He would let Dad suffer for so long. It didn't seem fair. I spent a lot of time in prayer during those four years, asking God to unlock the chains that held his mind, but my prayers seemed to go unanswered.

During that time I thought about the incredible stories of great healing in the Bible, people like Lazarus, who was raised from the dead. Lazarus was dead for four days before Jesus brought him back

to life. Can you imagine how his family must have felt when he walked out of that tomb! Unbelievable joy! Then I would argue with God and say something like, “If you raised Lazarus from the dead, why won’t you heal Dad’s mind? His body is still incredibly strong, yet he sits there locked in this prison that we can’t break into.” It was heartbreaking. I don’t pretend to understand why God heals in some instances and doesn’t in others, but I have learned to trust that God heard every prayer I prayed and saw every tear I cried. Someday I hope to understand why Dad suffered the way he did.

The one bright spot in all of this was something that had always been a bright spot in our family, music. Dad was the biggest fan of the Miller Sisters when we were younger, and every time all of us girls were there at Sunrise together we would sing to him. Mom insisted on it! I would also sing to him every time I visited him by myself, usually “How Great Thou Art” or “Amazing Grace,” songs from his past. Those times when I was singing to him by myself, or we were singing to him as a family, were the only times I noticed a flicker of remembrance in his eyes. Yes, he did know who we were! He remembered! I knew he enjoyed it, even though he couldn’t get the words out, by the tiny little spark in his eyes. Music was truly our last connection with Dad, and we treasure those moments. He will forever be our favorite audience that we had the privilege and honor to sing for.

We also learned a great deal from watching our mom’s loving and dedicated care for Dad. She was a rock for him and was at the nursing home once or twice every day, feeding him and caring for him. She was grace in the flesh, love in action, and I witnessed the marriage vows “for better or for worse” acted out every single day. I saw a strength in her that I had not appreciated up until that time, and I hope I will be able to show the same strength if called upon in my life. She remained right there at his side until he died at age 71. It had been a long nine years since his initial stroke, but his journey of

suffering was finally over. We all knew he was at rest and whole again in Heaven, that his mind was clear again as the chains were forever broken, and now we can't wait for the time when we are all together so we can sing for him once more!

Dad had quite a connection with Sunrise. Besides spending the last years of his life there, he also built many of the housing units there before he got sick. My brother, who is a builder like Dad was, had also built the Gerwulf Recreation Center. On top of that, my sister Kathy worked in the business office for 16 years, so our family had a long, storied history with Sunrise and we can't speak highly enough about the wonderful care that is given at the facility.

A number of years after Dad passed away, Sunrise approached me about the possibility of doing a benefit concert for them. It just so happened that I had a brand new CD out, *Butterfly*, and so we did a CD release concert at the beautiful Orpheum Theatre. It was the start of what would become an annual tradition. The first couple of shows were held in the spring, but when I recorded my Christmas CD, we changed the concert to December and made it a Christmas show. I have done seven concerts for them so far, and they just keep getting bigger and bigger and better and better! I'm proud to say that as of the writing of this book we had raised more than \$250,000 for Sunrise.

A few years after we first started working together, Sunrise officials approached me about writing a song for them to use in their commercials. They needed a new theme song, and they wanted a song that told their story. I thought it sounded like an interesting project, so I agreed to take it on. I quickly discovered that it's one thing to write a 30-second jingle, but writing an entire song to tell an organization's story in a positive way is something that can be quite difficult! I struggled with how to write it and basically put it off, as good procrastinators do. I just couldn't seem to get anywhere with it when I tried to work on it. I finally had an idea for a direction to go,

and several months later I had a song written: “It’s the Love.” I met with Sunrise to share the song, and they loved it. We quickly made plans to record the song in Nashville, and I ended up including it as a bonus track on my Christmas project, *Christmas Is Here*.

Sunrise used the song, “It’s the Love,” as their TV and radio commercial for a number of years. We debuted the song, along with my new Christmas CD, at our Christmas show in 2009. People loved it! It’s always a thrill to sing at the Orpheum, and especially at Christmas. There’s no better place to do a Christmas show!

We start planning our Christmas shows in June, and when we met to discuss the concert in June of 2011, Sunrise was in the middle of a capital campaign for a new building. When they told me the theme for the campaign was “Seeing A New Sunrise,” my songwriter’s brain instantly perked up, and I knew I had to write a song for this. The title “A New Sunrise” was very inviting for a Pollyanna like me!

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er’s brain instantly perked up, and I knew I had to write a song for this. The title “A New Sunrise” was very inviting for a Pollyanna like me!

So on to the lyrics of the song. “*Close your eyes and just imagine, picture a brand new day, where people come together to make a better way. Working for something greater*

than we alone could ever create.” It’s hard, I know, in this day and age to remain positive. As I touched on earlier, the news media knows that negative publicity is what sells, so that’s what they feed us day after day. We hear about financial problems, social issues, and people living under terrible oppression. Then there are all the celebrity stories that I won’t even get into. They make me crazy sometimes, and I often wonder why we love to hear about the personal stories of people we don’t really know, stories of drug abuse, bad decisions, and, basically, messed-up lives. Maybe hearing these stories makes us feel better about our own lives. We all want to hear about someone who has it worse than we do!

The problem with negative thinking is it causes us to throw in the towel and give up. If we think there's nothing we can do, then we do nothing. We become stagnant. We sit back and get too satisfied with the status quo. We see something we don't agree with, yet we don't get off our butts long enough to try and find a solution.

When we do come together, we really can make a difference. This truth has been carried out many times in our nation's history, but I'd like to share a story I've experienced firsthand, something a little closer to home.

I've been an animal lover my entire life, and I know I will never not have a dog—at least one, and probably two or three at a time. I absolutely love them and honestly can't imagine a house without one. When I was asked to join the Humane Society's board of directors back in 1993, it was a quick yes because I love animals so much and knew this was a cause I wanted to be involved with.

When I joined, however, the shelter and the board were both a mess. We were in a very old building that was literally falling down. On top of that, we had a board that was not very healthy. There were lots of people trying to be the captain, and we've all heard the Danish proverb that "Too many captains will sink the ship." That is exactly what was happening with the board and the entire organization. There was a plethora of things that needed to be done; we needed a new building and new operating plan, but personalities started coming into play and people started taking sides. We started focusing on the negative and worried more about "getting our way" than doing what was right. It was downright ugly at times, to be honest, and extremely nonproductive.

However, a few people started working diligently to find common ground, finding ways to work as a team, and the ship started changing directions. We weren't sailing in circles any longer, and we started inching our way forward. We did a few board retreats and hired a professional board facilitator who helped us work through the issues

we were facing as a group. It was hard work and some feelings got hurt along the way, but it was remarkable to see what we could accomplish when we came together as a team.

We ended up launching a successful capital campaign to build a brand new shelter, and we also agreed on new management policies and procedures. Our shelter is now a model shelter, and we adopt out more than 90 percent of the animals placed with us, compared to the national average of only 37 percent. We have also been touted as one of the cleanest and best-run shelters in Iowa, a far cry from the time when I joined the board. By working together, we did something that would never have been possible for any one person to do on their own. I have witnessed, firsthand, that when people come together they can make a better way!

"I see a world full of love and mercy, arms open wide. A graceful, loving spirit coming alive. I see a new sunrise." This Pollyanna honestly believes that there is more good in people than bad. We often only see the bad, but God created us, and He placed himself in each of us. The Bible tells us in Genesis that God created us in His image, so I believe we are inherently good. Of course, sin and everything in this world eats away at that goodness, but the goodness is there all the same. It doesn't change who our loving Creator created us to be.

Psalm 139:13, 14 says, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my

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mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful." I know there are a lot of days when I don't feel very wonderful, but the Bible, the very Word of God, tells me that I am. I have read this verse over and over on those days when I am full of doubt and feel like the biggest failure on the planet. Anyone else ever feel that way? I'm sure some of you have. Yet this verse assures me and you that we are wonderfully made. There is a graceful, loving spirit inside of us that we simply need to find a way to tap into.

One of my favorite Bible verses is: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). To be honest, that is the heart of my personal theology as well. I believe if we all did just that we wouldn't have to worry about denominations and different beliefs. None of that would matter because we would just love no matter what. That is our highest calling as Christians, yet we all know it's not very easy to act out in our everyday lives. Some people just aren't very easy to love, and sometimes life has made us put up walls we can't seem to tear down, walls that keep us from being free to love. Yet if we break it down and get to the heart of the matter, that's really all we need to do, plain and simple: love. That one, simple act could literally change the world.

How can we nurture the love inside of us and help release the love inside of others? How can we tear down the walls we put up around ourselves and reach out to others? These are questions I think we all need to wrestle with and work on every day of our lives.

"People with conviction are impossible to contain. Once they start believing they become the winds of change. The dream is all they're seeing as the spark becomes a flame." Thank God for the dreamers of this world, people like Martin Luther King Jr., who saw something that wasn't right and did something about it. The greatest dreamers didn't wait for anyone else to do it, but forged ahead with their

dreams and literally changed a nation. Can you imagine how many “This will never work” or “Things will never change” admonitions King Jr. must have received along the way? Considering segregation and the racism that was rampant in our country at that time, I’m sure it was staggering. Yet he fought for what he believed in, right up to his death.

And speaking of fighting to his death, at the top of the list is our Savior, Jesus Christ. He knew the world and all the evil in it better than we do because he could see into people’s very hearts. Even when we are basically on the right path, the Bible tells us our hearts are evil. It says in Jeremiah 17:9, 10: “The heart is hopelessly dark and deceitful, a puzzle that no one can figure out. But I, God, search the heart and examine the mind. I get to the heart of the human. I get to

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the root of things. I treat them as they really are, not as they pretend to be” (*The Message*).

Jesus, who knows us better than we know ourselves, who sees all of our weaknesses and our sinful natures, continued to forge on with what he knew was right. Despite all the negativity, he dared to see a new day! He continued to believe in humanity when we didn’t believe in ourselves. He believed enough to die on the cross for each and every one of us.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream was a tiny spark when it started. Just think about it. He lived in the Deep South, where there were signs everywhere segregating blacks and whites. Today we can’t imagine living like that, but I’m sure at the time they couldn’t imagine living

any other way. How could things ever really change? Things had always been this way and probably would always remain that way. Yet a dream was formed, a spark was lit, and that spark became a roaring fire of change. Marching as one, the Freedom Coalition changed the hearts of America and helped us see the injustices we were inflicting on African-Americans. Things really could change and be different if we just believed. King's spark of conviction and passion changed our nation forever.

A New Sunrise

Where I was when this song came to me: At Sunrise Retirement Community at a committee meeting discussing our Christmas show

Month, year written: July 2011

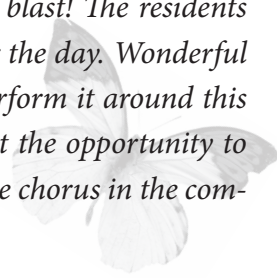
How long it took me to write: I tweaked this one right up to the time we were recording it in the studio. We ended up deleting a line from the verses during the tracking session in the studio because, melodically, it felt better that way. I then had to go home and rework the lyrics again to fit the new melody.

When I just knew I 'had it': When we heard the playback in the studio with the new lyrics and melody!

Musical style/inspiration this most closely matches: It has a fun, 1970s sound to it, which is totally different from where the song started!

Anything else fun or noteworthy about "A New Sunrise"? Sunrise has used this song in their TV and radio commercials for a number of years now. We shot a commercial with the residents

where I sang the song over and over and over to the residents as they clapped along. It took more than three hours to shoot a 30-second commercial, but it was a total blast! The residents loved it, and they all felt like movie stars for the day. Wonderful memories, for me and for them! When I perform it around this area, people love hearing it because they get the opportunity to hear the entire song. They only get to hear the chorus in the commercial. It's been very fun!



"You can tell me I'm a dreamer, and I guess that's probably true. But I'll never stop believing that there is good in me and you. Sometimes it needs a little bit of help to break through." It's easy to get caught up in the trap of thinking people are horrible and immoral. Yet while I don't like a lot of what's going on in the world, especially with our younger generation, I wonder how much the world has really changed. If you want to hear about depravity, just read the Old Testament. There was intense fighting and some really crazy stuff going on back then. It started with the very first family, when Cain killed his brother Abel. Now that is some serious sibling rivalry! I know my boys fought a lot when they were little, and I was afraid they might really hurt each other someday, but we don't look so bad compared to those two brothers!

And talk about depraved: my favorite author of all time, King David, had huge lapses of moral judgment. Remember how he slept with his friend Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, and then, to hide what he had done, had Uriah killed in battle? That's covering two of the "biggies" right there: adultery *and* murder. Yet the Bible also tells us that David was a "man after God's own heart." He wasn't perfect by any means, but that doesn't mean that God couldn't use him. His psalms, which are really just songs, have ministered to me like nothing else.

I try to start every day by reading a Psalm, and my favorite ones always seem to be written by David. He knew how to inspire and move people in spite of all the things wrong and negative in his life, including his own behavior at times. He is proof that God can use any of us, complete with our flaws and failures, if we are simply willing to be of service.

So while I might be considered a Pollyanna, the truth is, Pollyanna had a point! There is always a way to find something good in a situation and something to be glad about if we look hard enough and dig deep enough. Jeremiah 29:11 tells us: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ says the Lord. ‘They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.’” I, for one, want to cling to that hope and try to find the good in life and in each other.

In spite of the odds against us, in spite of the negativity in the world, our faith calls us to do exactly that, to find the good in each other and show each other love and respect. If we do that one little act, if we love others well, I will never stop believing that together we can change the world!

I’m also happy to report that my relationship with Sunrise continues to flourish. The organization had a successful capital campaign and was able to build a brand new state-of-the-art building that allows Sunrise to provide even better care for its residents. It feels good to know that my music played a small part in that success.

As for as my dad, he’s been gone almost 13 years now, but I still miss him very much and cry at the weirdest moments, such as when random memories come to me. However, I know his goodness, his strength, and his love continue to live on in me and my family. So while I wish he never had to suffer the way he did and for as long as he did, his suffering enabled me to see the wonderful love and care people offer one another in the most difficult of situations. Pollyanna would be proud!



Love Always Wins



Words and Music by Jill Miller

*It's been a while since we said I do
Two little words that joined me and you forever
Sometimes we wonder how we'll get by
Feels like we're losing no matter how hard we try together
Faith keeps us hanging on when the winds are blowing strong*

*Life will try to bring us down, we are called to stand our ground
When we fall we get back up again
If we're always keeping Christ in the center of our lives
He will show us how to bend
When we put our trust in Him
Love always wins
Love always wins*

*The world tries to tell us that it's okay
To quit the game, move on, throw it all away when times get tough
But we stood before God and made a vow
That we would find a way to work it out somehow, we're not giving up*

Love keeps us hanging on and the storms will make us strong

*Life will try to bring us down, we are called to stand our ground
When we fall we get back up again
If we're always keeping Christ in the center of our lives
He will show us how to bend
When we put our trust in Him*

*So forget who's wrong and who's right
Let's just keep God's grace in sight
I'll be here for you, you'll be there for me
This is where we are always going to be*

*Life will try to bring us down, but when we fall we get back up
again
If we're always keeping Christ in the center of our lives
He will show us how to bend
When we put our trust in Him
Love always wins
Love always wins*



You might be asking me, “How can you write a song about marriage, Jill, when you’ve been through a divorce?” That’s a good question, and one I asked myself as I started writing this chapter.

Here’s the deal: I am definitely not an expert on marriage, as evidenced by my failure at my first one. I have, however, learned a lot about marriage from failing at it. I saw firsthand what doesn’t work and how easily marriage can be taken for granted. So please consider this chapter as a “lessons I’ve learned along the way” chapter, and hopefully you will gain some knowledge from the mistakes I made.

This song was written to go along with a marriage series we were doing at church. I love to write songs for sermons, and my pastor, Jeff Moes, is gracious enough to give me his sermon outlines, which I then use to try to write a song that will come alongside his message. I don't remember for sure on this one if I had all his notes or just a general idea that it was a marriage series, but I felt the prompting by the Holy Spirit to write a song for a Sunday that I was going to be singing at church. I've learned to listen to that prompting pretty closely because it always seems to know best!

As I thought about marriage, I instantly thought about how they start, the wedding. I have sung at more weddings than I can remember through the years, so I know firsthand how beautifully marriages start out. There's a great amount of love and anticipation in the air at weddings. It's a day most women dream about their whole lives, and they feel like a princess the entire day.

The sad reality is some of the most elaborate, expensive, and seemingly "perfect" weddings that I have sung at have ended in divorce. I can remember one in particular that was over-the-top gorgeous. From the bride's beautiful gown to the fabulous flowers and food at the reception, no expense was spared. The bride and groom looked incredibly happy together. I was shocked to find out two years later that they had already split. What happened, I wondered, to make them give up so quickly? I also had to wonder if this elaborate wedding was even paid for before they were calling it quits, and it all seemed very sad to me.

In order to write this song, I reflected on my own marriage, of course. Things began very innocently for John and me. John's family has owned a furniture store in Sioux City for more than 60 years. It just so happens that John's dad, also John, and my first husband's dad were very good friends. Because of this, we always bought our furniture at Miller Brothers and were basically forbidden to go anywhere else. Because of this, I knew John for most of my married life, and I

knew about a divorce he had gone through three years before I went through mine. His wife had left him for another man, and John was raising his two boys by himself. We definitely had a lot in common.

In the course of my divorce, I sold my house to buy a smaller, more manageable home. We lived on ten acres of land, and I couldn't handle all of that by myself. I found the perfect house in town, and the boys and I were excited about our new place. It was close to their dad's house, which the boys really liked because they could ride their bikes to his place down the hill. Once I got in my new house, I realized that I needed a few pieces of furniture. I went to Miller Brothers to shop, of course, because that's where I had always gone. When I went there, John and I began talking. He knew about my situation, and he was very empathetic because he was aware, firsthand, of the pain I was going through. We had some in-depth conversations as I looked at a bright red couch for my new living room; all of this was rather exciting because this was the first piece of furniture I had ever purchased totally on my own. There was something very empowering about it.

I went into the store numerous times to look at my potential purchase, and John and I struck up conversations every time. I had the feeling that he liked me, but I had made it very clear to him that I would not date until my divorce was final. It didn't feel right to me because I knew I was still officially married until those papers were

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filed, plus I wasn't really interested in entering into a relationship at that time. But we continued our casual talks during that summer as the legal proceedings were winding down.

Today we laugh about the time when he came to my house to measure for some new carpet that I needed. He showed up with a simple notepad and his tape measure to perform a mundane task that I know he could do in his sleep—yet it took him four hours to measure a simple set of steps! It was pretty clear that he was interested in more than selling me some carpet!

A few weeks after my divorce was finally done and all the legal papers filed, I went to the store to order the carpet that had taken him so long to measure for. I remember it was a Wednesday because my boys were with their dad that night. John and I sat down to go over my order, I wrote out my check, and then he casually asked me to dinner. I kind of caught my breath, and I quickly thought to myself: *Well, the boys are gone and I absolutely hate eating by myself.* I had found the nights when my boys were at their dad's to be the loneliest times of my life. It was torture for me to be in my house without my boys there with me, and so the thought of not having to eat by myself sounded very inviting. Plus, I thought John was very handsome, and I knew we had a lot in common. Dinner sounded great, so I cautiously said yes.

He picked me up a little while later, and we had an amazing night together. I don't think we stopped talking for two straight hours—or I should say I didn't stop talking. For some reason, I felt like I could bare my soul to this guy, and I did. I went home with my head spinning. *What's going on here? I really like him. This is crazy. I don't even want a relationship!*

He called me the next day and asked me out that weekend, and things started rolling very quickly from that point forward. I knew everything was going way too fast by logical social standards, but God just seemed to be drawing us together; and I somehow knew we

were falling for each other.

I was terrified, to be honest, and tried to talk myself out of it. My head told me to slow everything down; it was just too fast and too soon. He was only my “rebound guy,” right? But as they say, you can’t stop love. It has a mind of its own. I started saying a little mantra to myself that I had come up with somewhere along the way: “Bless it or block it.” I was asking God to either bring us together, to bless it, or to lead us apart, to block it. The key to this little saying is that I had to be OK with either answer. I couldn’t have any preconceived

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notions of how I wanted things to go. I had to totally and completely trust God and let the situation go entirely.

“Bless it or block it” became my constant prayer. There were times when we were dating that I would say it a hundred times or more in one afternoon. I would get off the phone with John and feel a flutter in my heart, and I would say out loud in my car: “Bless it or block it, Lord. This is too soon, this is so wrong, but it feels so right. I’m so confused!”

This prayer was very powerful for me and was one of the first times in my life

I truly laid an issue in God’s hands, not wanting to sway the outcome one way or the other. I’m sure you are a lot like me, and usually when we lay something at Jesus’ feet we have a pretty good idea of how we want the situation to turn out, right? Usually a tiny part of us hopes for one outcome over another. This time I truly didn’t know what the right thing was. I had no clue. I knew I had strong feelings for John, but I also knew I didn’t want to enter into a relationship that wasn’t 100 percent guided and directed by God’s hand.

I was petrified that I might make another mistake, and I also didn't want my kids to get hurt. They were getting very close to John, and I didn't want them to lose another male figure in their lives. I realize that they had not lost their dad, but it's definitely a different relationship when you don't live in the same house any more.

The harder I prayed this simple prayer—"bless it or block it"—the more I felt God was leading me to John. This was right. This was good. This was love. Our relationship kept moving forward, and he proposed in April 2005. We were married in August. We had dated about eight months when we got engaged and were married within a year of when we started dating. Crazy, huh?

I have to say that when John and I got married in August of 2005 the wedding was magical. We were married on the beach in Maui at sunset with our children present. It was picture perfect! We then had a beautiful dedication ceremony and reception back home in Iowa with friends and family. Both of our pastors presided as they blessed our marriage, and it was a fantastic evening of celebration. Everyone was ecstatic for John and me because we had both been the ones that our spouses left for other people. The two people who were dumped by another had found each other, and it was like a fairy tale.

The thing that was so different from my first marriage and the thing I was so excited about this time around was I knew Jesus Christ was at the center of our marriage, exactly where He needed to be. I hadn't had that before, as much I had tried to make it happen, and I knew that that single thing would make all the difference in the world. To have a husband who shared my faith and my beliefs was all I could ask for, plus John is just an all-around great guy.

Fast-forward six years to when I was writing this song, and I realized that as perfect as John and I were for each other and as strong as our love was for each other, marriage is work. This is not easy! Even with our faith in the center of it, we had lots of issues to deal with. Neither one of us had ever been a stepparent before, but here

we were smack dab in the middle of a blended family with four boys, his two boys and my two. When we got married three of them were teenagers, so you can imagine the chaos that filled our home! All four lived with us the majority of the time, so it was a pretty crazy house.

One night, we were sitting at the dining room table eating supper, and all four boys were there. The conversation was here, there, and everywhere. With four boys, someone was always getting teased about something or there was some crazy story about something that happened at school, and this was a typical evening. John looked at me very seriously during the middle of dinner and said, "Honey, we have four boys, and they share one brain. And we never know who has it!" It was hilarious, and we laughed for a good, long time about that one. The boys thought it was pretty funny too.

The crazy thing is, there seemed to be more truth in that statement than you might think. There always seemed to be some issue going on with at least one of the boys, and life was in a constant state of chaos, as those of you who have raised teenagers know. Our house also felt like it had a revolving door on it, with the boys' friends coming and going constantly. It was pretty crazy at times, but most of the time I loved the chaos.

In the midst of that messiness, tragedy struck during our first year of marriage. In November, three months after we were wed, John's dad had a heart attack and passed away. He had undergone heart surgery the previous May, but the doctors thought he would have a full recovery. He was back working and seemed to be doing fair-

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ly well. However, he came home from work on a Friday night and slumped over at the table. He was rushed to the hospital and died the next morning. The tragic part was John's mom, Colleen, was in the hospital herself, in Omaha, at the time he died, so she was not there with him. We all headed to Omaha after John's dad passed to break the news to her. It was horrible and one of the saddest things I have ever witnessed when we gave her the shocking news. She had lost the love of her life, and she was heartbroken.

Colleen had been in the hospital for about three months when her husband died. She was hospitalized because of complications from a surgery she had had many years before. Because of these complications, she had had most of her colon removed, had developed cancer, and she was being fed through a tube. She could not eat any food at all, so she was obviously extremely ill. It was a very sad situation and a long, painful journey of suffering for her; everyone was prepared for her passing. John's dad's death, however, was totally unexpected.

Colleen gave up her fight after her husband died. She came home from the hospital a month later, in December, but her joy and her will to live were all gone. You could see it in her eyes. Her heart was broken, and all she talked about was joining John in Heaven. Her fight ended in April when she passed away, and within five months both of John's parents were gone. It was obviously devastating to their five children and many grandchildren.

John handled it amazingly well, but my heart ached for him. His mother had been an incredible source of love and strength in his life, his rock, and he missed her deeply. On top of that, he had worked more than 35 years with his dad at their family-owned furniture store, so every part of his life was affected. He couldn't go anywhere without remembrances of both of his parents. And, bottom line, there was no time to grieve. We had four busy boys and four dogs to take care of. Life went on in spite of his grief.

As I look back, I marvel at John's strength and his faith. He had

some very sad days, as is to be expected, but he never took his grief out on me or the children. He was a rock. He lived out David's cry in Psalm 116:3-6: "The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the Lord: 'Lord, save me!' The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The Lord protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me." What a change for me to experience that kind of faith in the midst of such extreme loss.

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It also became pretty clear to me why God had brought us together so quickly. At the time I thought it was because of Christopher and the help I needed with him. After Colleen died, though, I realized that John needed me as much as I needed him. I can't imagine how he would have survived that devastating year alone with his boys. I believe God in His infinite wisdom knew John needed someone beside him to walk through this very dark time in his life.

I also see God's hand at work in my divorce. Not that that's what God wanted, because I know he hates divorce, but God definitely made good things happen in the aftermath. For the first time in my life, I have a man beside me who believes in me and my ministry even more than I do. John is constantly building me up and encouraging me when I want to throw in the towel. When I've wanted to get a "real" job that is more stable financially, he consistently tells me, "We'll be fine. You focus on your ministry. I believe in you!" I really couldn't ask for more.

So, on to the song!

"It's been a while since we said I do. Two little words that joined me and you forever." I wonder if anyone really believes that anymore, that marriage is something that's designed to last forever. It saddens me to think about how commonplace divorce is, but it truly wasn't for me. It wasn't OK in my eyes. It was a *huge* loss and a *huge* disappointment in myself. I believed in being married for life, and I felt that you should do everything you could to stay together and work it out. That is how God intended marriage from the beginning. In Genesis 2, in the Garden of Eden, God brought Adam and Eve together and said, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." One flesh, one unit, something that should not be separated. I wanted that, but things don't always work out as we hope or as we plan.

"Sometimes we wonder how we'll get by. Feels like we're losing no matter how hard we try together. Faith keeps us hanging on when the winds are blowing strong." Marriage can definitely feel like an uphill battle at times. It's hard to bring together two different people who were raised very differently and meld them into one household. Add stepchildren to the mix, and it gets even more difficult. Unfortunately, I think, plain and simple, couples give up way too easily these days. We have this notion that it's supposed to be easier than it is. Then when we hit some rough times, we instantly think that we've made a mistake by getting married in the first place. And the world is definitely going to give us rough times, the winds are definitely going to blow, and our marriages are definitely going to be tested.

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I heard a great sermon at church that talked about how important pursuing our faith together as a couple is, especially praying together. There is truly no better way to divorce-proof your marriage than praying together. I know for John and I, those times when we pray together are the most intimate times of our marriage. We are making a more concerted effort to make prayer time something we do every single day; not just a quick mealtime prayer, but we are earnestly trying to spend time in extended prayer together. Nothing has made me feel more safe and secure than praying with my husband and knowing that my husband is praying for me throughout the day.

“Life will try to bring us down, we are called to stand our ground. When we fall we get back up again.” No matter how perfect and right we seem to be for each other, we are going to make mistakes and let each other down at times. We are going to fall down. Of course we are. We are only human. When you bring two people together who are full of their own emotional garbage, which we all have, that garbage is going to spill out at times, and it’s going to start smelling pretty bad.

When we date, we usually place the other person on an incredible pedestal, don’t we? Everything he does seems wonderful. That picture of perfection quickly changes when you start living with this other person day in and day out and start seeing some of their annoying behaviors. And we all have them! A dirty pair of socks left on the floor can put you over the top some days. When I’m really tired and have had a bad day, John is always the one who gets the brunt of it. It usually has nothing to do with him, but he’s the one closest to me, so he gets it. Unfortunately, it’s what we all do. We take our frustrations out on the ones we love the most.

Faith reminds us to, “Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others” Colossians 3:13 (NLT). Marriage has to be filled with forgiveness and grace or it will never work. Faith can

help us stand back up. Faith can help us find the grace and forgiveness we are always going to need to give to each other.

Love Always Wins

Where I was when this song came to me: In my music room reviewing my pastor's sermon notes

Month, year written: January 2012

How long it took me to write: A week on the original version, but I was continually tweaking it after that!

When I just knew I 'had it': When I played it at church and the worship arts director told me he loved it and that it was one of his favorites of mine.

Anything else fun or noteworthy about "Love Always Wins"?
It felt good to write a song about marriage and how we have to fight for it at times. There aren't enough Christian-based songs out there that encourage us to hang in there.

"If we're always keeping Christ in the center of our lives, He will show us how to bend." Having faith at the center of my marriage has been amazing. There's a level of trust and commitment that can only be attained when both of us have a single focus, the cross. John and I tease each other about being Number 2, since we are both in our second marriages, but we actually mean it in a good way as well. God is our Number 1, and our spouse is our Number 2. It's how God intended it to be, but we still have a little fun with it.

Besides having our faith at the center of our marriage, the other key word in that line is the little word "bend." Such a small word, but

an incredibly powerful one when used in the context of marriage. We have to learn to bend and not break, give in a little here and there, and learn to compromise. It's hard to do. I don't like it when I don't get my way. I want to stomp my feet and go off and pout, but I know it's not very productive. Oh, I've done it a time or two (or twenty!), believe me. But the problem is, when I come out of my little temper tantrum, the issue is still there and I still have to find a way to deal with it. My temper tantrum has really done nothing but prolong the agony. If I would just stand there and deal with it, learn to give a little here and there, learn to compromise and talk things out, it would all be over a lot sooner.

"When we put our trust in Him, love always wins." Our highest calling as Christians is to love. It's the greatest commandment Jesus gave us when he was on earth, to love, plain and simple: love God and love others. Sounds so simple and easy, but this commandment is very hard to put into practice, especially when you live with someone. I'll admit it: some days I don't really like John. I love him, but I don't really like him. Some days just the way he breathes can annoy me. I don't like that about myself, but it's true. I'm sure he probably feels the same way about me.

The thing is, I know that "this too shall pass." We will work through our issues as long as we trust God to help us work them out. Then we eventually like each other again, and love really does win.

"The world tries to tell us that it's okay to quit the game, move on, throw it all away when times get tough." Statistics tell us that there is a divorce in America every 16 seconds. Isn't that sad? The experts can tell you all they want about how kids adjust to divorce and if everyone just "gets along" it will all be OK, but I've lived it. I've seen the tears my boys have shed when they can't be with both their dad and mom on the holidays, when they have to spend their time going back and forth between homes, when they wonder if they had only been "better" then maybe we would have stayed together. No matter how

many times you tell them it was not their fault, they feel responsible. I've seen the stress firsthand, and it makes me sad knowing that my boys will have scars from our separation they will carry with them throughout their lives. I know they will be OK and will live functional lives, but the scars will be there just the same.

I can close my eyes and vividly see Sam lying in the grass outside our house, pounding his fists and kicking his feet, sobbing his little heart out, saying, "No, Daddy, don't leave us" the night his dad left our home. My heart has a scar from that night, and I know Sam has one as well. I've done my best to help heal that scar, but just because divorce happens more frequently today does not make it any easier for children now than it was fifty years ago.

"But we stood before God and made a vow that we would find a way to work it out somehow, we're not giving up. Love keeps us hanging on and the storms will make us strong." Marriage is exactly that, a vow, a covenant before God. More than a civil ceremony, it is a covenant with God. Mark 10:7, 8, says: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh." God has joined us together for life.

When we stand in front of our friends and family in our beautiful clothes and say our vows, this covenant is meant to be a commitment for life. We stand before God and say, in spite of our sin, in spite of our failings, in spite of ourselves, "I pledge to love this other person to the best of my ability till death do us part."

The challenge is learning how to work it out when we face those storms. If we can make a commitment to fight fair, not call each other names, not bring up the past, and not raise our voices, things are going to go a whole lot smoother. One of the things I appreciate about John the most is that he rarely raises his voice when we are arguing. I can tell that he is fuming inside and sometimes I'm pushing him right to the edge; I can be really good at that. But if John gets to

that point, he usually just walks away. He goes and cools off, which gives me a chance to cool off, and then we try again. We don't always get it right, but not yelling at each other and trying different ways to work out our differences has been huge.

"So forget who's wrong and who's right. Let's just keep God's grace in sight." When I was a court reporter, I always hated the dissolution of marriage or divorce cases. They were the worst, and usually incredibly contentious. People who once loved each other now sat in court and dredged up every little thing that the other person had ever done wrong to them. They would go on and on about things that had happened ten years earlier, and it was amazing to see the level of emotion they still held about things that had happened so long ago. It was horrible, and to be honest, many of the things seemed quite petty as well. The infractions might have been huge in that person's memory, but when they talked about them in court they were never as big as they imagined. I saw firsthand how hanging on to a record of who is wrong and who is right will get you absolutely nowhere.

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I am not perfect, and neither is John. Because of that, we are going to offend each other at times, hurt each other's feelings at times, and disappoint each other at times. How I handle those disappointments is up to me. I can choose to hold on to them and make them grow bigger and bigger in my mind, or I can show the mercy and grace to my spouse that I receive from my Savior. 1 Corinthians 13:5 tells us that love "keeps no record of wrongs." A beautiful, simple reminder to let things go.

"I'll be here for you, you'll be there for me, this is where we are

always going to be.” When I started dating John, I was petrified that I was going to screw things up again, that I would make the wrong choice, that I wasn’t ready for a relationship. I did, however, know that I didn’t want to be alone my whole life. I knew I wanted and longed for the companionship of a husband. I yearned for someone who was going to walk beside me. What a comfort it is knowing someone else has your back. That’s what I think a great marriage is all about, having each other’s backs.

So as I reflect on what I’ve learned along the way and any possible gems of wisdom I could pass along, I came up with what I believe are the five most important things.

No. 1: *Faith has to be at the center of your marriage.* I just don’t see it working any other way. If faith is not at the center, a marriage will eventually self-destruct. It may take a year or two or ten or even twenty like my first marriage, but it will probably derail at one point or another. Our pastor always says that God needs to be our Number 1 and our spouse needs to be our Number 2. We also need to seek our Number 1 *with* our Number 2!

No. 2: *Never stop dating!* Never stop going out to dinner or a movie or a bike ride or whatever it is you enjoyed while you were dating. Too often in our marriages we get caught up in our kids’ lives and going out with friends and we don’t spend time alone as a couple. For John and I, continuing to date has been very important. We need to have fun together like we did when we were first getting to know each other. John always says that we need to go back to “Class 101.” In other words, we need to keep it simple and keep doing the things that worked when we were dating.

No. 3: *Love and respect each other.* We went through a Bible study called Love and Respect, an incredible book by Dr. Emerson Eggerichs. John and I think every couple that is planning on getting married should have to read it. It’s that good! The back of the book displays its simple message, “A wife has one driving need—to feel loved.

When that need is met, she is happy. A husband has one driving need—to feel respected. When that need is met, he is happy. When either of these needs isn't met, things get crazy.” In the book, he then talks a lot about the differences between men and women and how those differences can get us on what he calls the “crazy cycle” where, without love, the woman reacts, and without respect, the husband reacts. He then talks about the “energizing cycle” where his love motivates her respect and her respect motivates his love.⁹ I am learning to try and stop and ask myself if a certain behavior I am displaying is showing John the love and respect he needs. I'm usually surprised at how that simple question can help me slow down, think before I speak, and stop the crazy cycle.

No. 4: *Guard your tongue!* Words were used as weapons in my first marriage, and I learned quickly how to fight back. It was my means of survival. It's interesting how my tongue, which was my weapon during those hard times, is now my instrument with my music and speaking. I've had to do an incredible amount of work in this area and have gone to God in prayer over and over through the years about guarding my tongue. I've memorized verses like, “He who guards his tongue guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin” (Proverbs 13:3). My mouth gets me in trouble more than anything. But I am learning, with John's love and grace, to put a sock in it! I don't have to express every emotion that comes to my mind. More often than not, once I take a minute to reflect and settle down, the issue we are facing isn't nearly as big as I make it in my head. I guess that's one of the pitfalls of living with a creative person; we can be very, very emotional!

No. 5: *Don't even think of divorce as an option.* My first marriage, as I mentioned, was very volatile at times. I often toyed with the idea of leaving, but never got very far with that thought because I believed so strongly in marriage. However, as I look back, I think even those frequent thoughts about divorce helped lead to our eventual demise.

When John and I first started going through some struggles in our marriage, when the honeymoon phase faded and reality set in, the “d word” came to my mind again. I would think to myself, “Maybe I did move too fast. Maybe this was a huge mistake. I can always leave.” I quickly realized that I could not let those thoughts come into my head again. They absolutely had to be stopped. They were Satan’s little claws getting inside my head, and I rebuked them, saying, “Divorce is not an option. Period.” I will not go there . . . *ever!*

I’m not saying there are not proper reasons for divorce, and I would never judge anyone who leaves their spouse. Heavens, I would be condemning myself. However, I do believe that before anyone leaves a marriage they should spend a great amount of time in prayer and meditation and know without a doubt that it’s God’s will that they leave, and not that they are leaving just because they’re frustrated with their spouse today.

Maybe it’s because I am more of an emotional person and deep thinker, but for me I have to keep those thoughts from entering at all because my brain will run out of control at times. I can get caught up in my anger and get off on a tangent, and pretty soon I’m on another planet; I’m not even close to earth. Once I made a decision to not go there, to not think of divorce as an option, to never give up, it has been easier to settle down, take a deep breath, and figure out the best way to handle whatever situation we are facing. How can I express myself in a healthy way and get my needs met? How can I deal with this situation in a godly way? How can I stand up for myself without hurting John? Not having an exit plan makes you deal with what’s going on and take the steps to work through it.

So while I’m only eight years into my second marriage, I feel like we are light years ahead of where I stood the first time around, the deciding factor being that faith is now at the center. There’s no substitute for that, and I thank God every day for bringing me a godly man and a godly marriage where Love Always Wins!



Stepping Out in Faith



Words and Music by Jill Miller

*It's 5 a.m. and, Lord, I'm scared
I hear your voice, but I'm not sure I'm prepared
I might stumble, and I will surely fall
If I walk on faith and heed your call*

*It's time to put my fear to bed
And listen, Lord, to you instead
And where you tell me go I'm gonna go
Stepping out in faith, stepping out in faith
Starting today, stepping out in faith*

*Lord, I know you've got my back
You will provide everything this sinner lacks
This tiny little bit of hope is gonna see me through
Gonna take a chance and see what faith can do*

*It's time to put my fear to bed
And listen, Lord, to you instead*

*And where you tell me go I'm gonna go
Stepping out in faith, stepping out in faith
Starting today, stepping out in faith*

*Doubt and fear and shame and all my insecurities,
Lord, they've been a chain around my neck for way too long
Right here and now I'm going to head out to that battlefield
Knowing your love is going to make me strong*

*It's time to put my fear to bed and listen
I need put this fear to bed
It's time to put my fear to bed and listen, Lord, to you instead
And where you tell me go I'm gonna go
Stepping out in faith, stepping out in faith
Starting today, stepping out in faith
Faith, stepping out in faith*



This song is actually pretty much exactly as life happened; it tells the story of what happened one night when I was on the road. I was in Denver for a conference for Incubator, a management company I was working with for awhile, when I woke up, quite suddenly, at 5 a.m. in a state of panic. Have you ever done that? I was filled with this overwhelming sense of doubt. *What in the world am I doing going into music at my age? I'm way too old. What in the world am I thinking? I'm not good enough to be doing music for a living. There are way better singers than me. My songs aren't as good as they should be, either.* It was one of those “what am I doing here?” moments, and I couldn't stop all of those doubts from bouncing around and around in my head. I tried with all my might to make them stop, but there was no way I was going to go back to sleep, so I gave in and got out

of bed, picked up my guitar, and started writing.

"It's 5 a.m. and, Lord, I'm scared. I hear your voice, but I'm not sure I'm prepared." My ministry was still fairly new at this point, and I was feeling pretty overwhelmed with it all. When I went into ministry, I imagined that I would simply sit and write songs all day, but I quickly discovered that there's so much more involved in music ministry than that. I had no idea how to market or book myself (these are the things Incubator was teaching me), and I had a lot to learn about running this new business as well. How do I get my songs heard by the right people? How do I find out what churches I might be a good fit for or ones that were willing to have an outside musician come in? How do I write a business plan? How do I get this thing off the ground? There were so many things to learn.

THE PERFORMANCE PART OF MY JOB IS ABSOLUTELY THE BEST PART, AND IT'S DEFINITELY WHAT KEEPS ME COMING BACK FOR MORE. HOWEVER, THAT'S ACTUALLY A VERY SMALL PERCENTAGE OF MY WORKING HOURS, THE TIME I GET TO PERFORM.	My life can sometimes seem kind of glamorous from the outside: I get to travel around the country and meet different people. I get to go into world-class studios in Nashville to record with some of the best studio players on the planet. I get to make music for a living; how sweet is that! I feel the most comfortable and have the most joy when I'm performing. All the doubt and everything related to it seems to disappear, and I absolutely love speaking and singing to an audience. The performance part of my job is absolutely the best part, and it's definitely what keeps me coming back for more. However, that's actually a very small percentage of my working hours, the time I get to perform. The vast majority of
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my time is spent alone in my office at home, working on songs, answering emails, making charts for my band, and more things of that nature. That's the part that trips me up and gets my mind in a tailspin at times—those are the long hours that I'm alone.

This loneliness has been overwhelming at times and honestly has been one of the biggest struggles for me in my stand-alone ministry. Day in and day out it's me and my dogs in my office, with no other humans anywhere around! I have felt like a Lone Ranger. I also typically travel by myself, which isn't always fun. Working in an office environment has its share of drama and problems, but when you're a social person, the alone time can be intimidating.

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God has seen that loneliness, however, and has provided! I now have five women from my church who volunteer and help me with my ministry. We call them Team Butterfly, and I am incredibly grateful for their love and support. I'm feeling less and less like a Lone Ranger and more and more uplifted by the prayers and support of these wonderful women. I also have a prayer team who lifts up me and my ministry in prayer. I feel very blessed.

So as I sat there in that hotel room in Denver, 5 a.m., guitar in hand, the words started flowing, and a melody quickly appeared. I started putting words to all the doubts and fears that were racing around inside of me. I knew for certain that I had heard God's voice telling me to do this crazy music thing, but I didn't feel like I knew

exactly what all I should be doing. This was not like any other job I had held in the past where there were measurable goals and timelines to follow. This was completely new and different, and I was making it up as I went along. I didn't feel like I was prepared at all.

"I might stumble, and I will surely fall if I walk on faith and heed your call." Because I really didn't have a clue what music ministry was supposed to look like when I first started on this journey, I've made plenty of bad decisions along the way and gone down way too many rabbit trails. But the thing I'm learning is, it's OK if I stumble and fall. God picks me right back up and shows me the path again. I'm trying to learn to be more prayerful about decisions that I make and not be so spontaneous. But the point is, I know I'm going to make mistakes, and that's OK. That's hard for a perfectionist to say, but God is helping me be a little easier on myself.

I need to be, because the music business is extremely competitive and downright brutal at times. You definitely have to have thick skin to be in this business, and that's something I have had to work hard on as well. The first time a professional songwriter picked apart one of my songs, my "babies," I was heartbroken. I fell down big time! It was tough to hear words of criticism about something I had worked so hard on, something that came from an intimate part of my soul, but as I got past the initial hurt and tried to understand and learn from what he was saying, I knew he was exactly right.

I'm sure none of you reading this like criticism any more than I do. It's hard, isn't it, especially when it involves something we have personally created or it involves a project we have worked extremely hard at. We tend to put walls up the minute we start hearing criticism and we try to avoid it at all costs. It's just not fun. However, I have learned that criticism given in a constructive, positive manner is necessary in order to improve in this business and, really, any business.

Those times when I have fallen down, when my feelings have been

hurt, God has gently reached down to help me keep going. It's usually through an email or a note I receive from a fan about how a song has touched them. I cherish them all and have them in a special file in my desk. God also quickly showed me that if I was going to continue on in this business, I was going to have to "put my big girl panties on" and get over myself. Criticism was going to be a part of it, and I had to try and learn all I could from the criticism in order to get better at my craft. Having thick skin was not in my nature at all, but luckily I'm also very tenacious and not one to give up easily. I was going to have to find a way to take the criticism and accept it. I would have to learn to not be so sensitive and hard on myself, something I continue to work at and struggle with to this day.

Stepping Out in Faith

Where I was when this song came to me: Hotel room in Denver, Colorado at 5 in the morning!

Month, year written: August 2008

How long it took me to write: Two hours

When I just knew I 'had it': When I played it for the other artists who were attending the conference and they could all relate!

Anything else fun or noteworthy about "Stepping Out in Faith"? I really never intended to include this song on the CD. It was a great song to close out my shows with, however, because of the message. People were constantly coming up to the merchandise table and asking for this song, always saying something about it really resonating with them, so we ended up including it on the CD. The customer is always right!

“It’s time to put my fear to bed and listen, Lord, to you instead. And where you tell me go I’m gonna go. Stepping out in faith.” The book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, is what helped me finally put my fear to bed and listen to God’s calling in my life. As I’ve talked about in previous chapters, I have loved music my entire life, and I had actually planned to go to Nashville when I graduated from high school, but life took me on a very different path. I met Jim my senior year, fell in love, and went to court reporting school instead. Talk about a change of plans! I always managed to keep my toe in music somehow, however.

The first time I read *The Purpose Driven Life*, by Rick Warren, was when I was in my first marriage and was in the middle of raising my boys. I had quit court reporting to be a full-time mom, but music was still part of who I was. I was in a band from my church called Celebrate, and I was also writing songs for Celebrate to perform. I thought that was enough to get my “music fix.” After reading that book, however, I felt this whisper in my ear that I needed to do more with my music.

The whisper was very clear, but it was faint, and I did what so many of us do when God calls out to us: I ignored it. I let my fear take over, and I quickly thought of all the reasons why I could never do music full time and simply went on with life as I knew it.

When I went through my divorce, I read *The Purpose Driven Life* again, and this time God was shouting in my ear, “Jill, you need to do

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music.” My faith had grown much deeper and stronger by this time, and I didn’t let fear guide me and push the voice to the side like I had before. I listened. I still didn’t know how doing music full time could possibly happen since I was going through a divorce and would be a single mom, but I had a quiet confidence that somehow God was going to make that happen. I didn’t know how or when, but I knew music was my calling and I would be doing it full time one day.

When John and I started getting serious in our dating relationship, I shared with him right away the calling that I felt God placing in my life. By that time I had recorded my first CD and was doing a little more music on the side, but I shared with John that I knew God was calling me to take a huge leap of faith and pursue my ministry and my music full time. John was very open to the idea and said, “We’ll pray about it, and when it feels right to us, let’s do it. Quit your job and go for it!” Wow, I wasn’t expecting that answer!

Two short months after we got married, I put my fear to bed and I did it! I turned in my two-week notice at the Humane Society, where I was working as their director of development, a job and place I dearly loved, and went into music. I had no idea what music ministry looked like. I only knew I was being asked to take that leap of faith, and I had to trust that God would show me the way.

My last day of work was on a Friday in October, and that next Monday I was scheduled to be in Nashville for a music conference and the start of this new career. As I drove home that Friday, I was scared to death. I kept thinking, “Jill, you are going to overwhelm this man. First with your kids and your dogs, and now you’re quitting your job. What are you thinking? Your marriage is doomed to fail!” I prayed fervently the whole way home and pleaded with God to somehow assure me that I was doing the right thing: “Tell me I’m not crazy!”

Now, remember, this is October in Iowa. There are typically not a lot of butterflies left in our area at that time of year, but as I drove

into my garage that night, there were three butterflies flying around! I looked at them with my mouth open and thought, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We're good!* I could not believe God had used a beautiful little butterfly to once again encourage me and tell me that I was indeed on the right path. Those little butterflies definitely helped me put my fear to bed and step out in faith!

"Lord, I know you've got my back. You will provide everything this sinner lacks. This tiny little bit of hope is gonna see me through. Gonna take a chance and see what faith can do." Many times along this journey that "tiny little bit of hope" was really all I had. Not only do I put pressure on myself to be the best singer/songwriter in the world (OK, so I'm a perfectionist!), in order to be in ministry I also feel an intense pressure to somehow have a perfect life, complete with perfect children, a perfect marriage, and a perfect attitude all the time. Yikes! We all know how that one goes for me. Not too well. It doesn't go well with any of us, no matter how hard we try. The minute one of my kids messes up (which is quite often!) I'm instantly telling myself that I don't have my life together enough to be in ministry. How can I stand on stage and talk about God when my life is such a mess? How can I pretend to have it all together when most of the time I don't?

As I talked through those issues and concerns with friends who are in ministry and with my pastor, it became obvious to me that we all struggle with those feelings. None of us has perfect lives, and I'm becoming more and more comfortable with the fact that God has not called me to be perfect but only to be willing. I am in need of grace every single day just like everyone else, and that's OK. The more pain and struggle I go through in life, the more experiences I have to share with others.

God speaks to me in those times of doubt with verses like Isaiah 41:10: "I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." God promises each and every one of us that He has our back and that he will hold us up in His mighty hand.

He has already won the battle for us. He is the victor, and we get to live in that victory! He promises to give us the strength we need to get through whatever life throws at us.

Psalm 103:11, 12 tells us: “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” God has taken our sins and removed them far from us. He doesn’t

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see them any more when He looks at us. It’s hard for many of us to not see them and to let our sins and failures go, but this verse tells us that God already has. He has removed them from one end of the earth to the other. They can’t be seen. He has not called you or me to be perfect, He has simply called us to be willing.

Fighting all of the doubts and fear that we all face can be a constant battle, and I realize more and more that this self-doubt is the way Satan gets his claws into our heads. He makes

us question ourselves and our own unique purpose. I’m learning to take those thoughts captive and put on the armor that we learn about in Ephesians 6:10-17:

Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around

your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

These beautiful verses tell us that God will enter our battle with us if we simply choose to stand, to stand and not let Satan and the powers of this world tear us down and tear down our dreams. If God has given us a dream, I know He will give us exactly what we need to achieve that dream at exactly the right moment. We need to put our fears to bed and leave them there!

By the time I went to my first meeting at 9 that morning in Denver, I was already exhausted, but the song was for the most part completed. I actually ended up sharing it with a group of musicians later that afternoon. It was amazing how much they could all relate to the sentiment of the song! Pretty crazy how songwriting works sometimes.

The thing that keeps me going and keeps me on this path is the fact that I know without a doubt this is the path God wants me to be on. I spent most of my life dabbling in music and dreaming of doing music for a living, always knowing in the back of my mind that that's what I was created to do, yet too afraid to take that leap of faith. Too afraid to get beyond the self-doubt to total trust in God. Too focused on what the world says is a "safe path" and trying to ignore the wild path God would have me go on.

The problem is, there's no road map in our lives, is there? It's hard to see where all the twists and turns are taking us. We think we're going one way, and then in an instant everything changes. We lose a loved one, a spouse leaves us, we lose our job, a child gets into trouble, and suddenly the destination we thought we were heading to seems out of reach.

Yet the Bible tells us that, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” If you think about a lamp, say, a lantern that you would use camping, it throws off a set amount of light. Imagine you’re on a twisted, turning path and it’s a totally black night; the moon and stars are not giving off much light. The lantern that lights the path in front of you doesn’t light the entire way to your destination, it only lights the path immediately in front of you. It gives off just enough light for you to move forward a step or two at a time. Those steps you can see clearly with the lantern, but the end result, the end of the path, the destination, is not in view. I believe that is exactly what God calls us to do, to simply trust His light for the next step or two and leave the final destination to Him.

I can honestly say that I have no idea exactly where this ministry will take me. I have lots of dreams, for sure, and I have definite goals that I am working extremely hard for. However, I’m learning more and more to simply do the work, stay on the path God has put before me, and leave the results to Him. I have a saying posted in my office that I read every day. It says: “**Believe it, con-**

ceive it, take steps to **achieve it**, then leave the rest to God and prepare to **receive it**.” That has become the motto that I am attempting to live by. It has helped me let go of some of the intense pressure I put on myself to achieve one goal after the other and it reminds me to let go and let God.

So I ask you, how has God called you to step out in faith? What is your true purpose in life, and are you living out that purpose? Do you even have a clue what that purpose is?

If not, I would encourage you to read, or re-read, *The Purpose*

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Driven Life. It truly changed my life, and I think if you are honest and real and open to God's prompting as you read it, it will help you find your purpose as well. It's the catalyst that got me into music ministry. And maybe your purpose isn't full-time ministry like mine, but maybe your calling is to reach out to others in the workplace or teach a Sunday school class or help in the church kitchen. I don't know what it is, but I *know* you have one. It's up to you to find out what it is. That's the exciting part!

Jeremiah 1:5 tells us: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." God had a plan for Jeremiah, just as he does for each of us. We are *all* part of His story, and I believe our most important job in life is to figure out what that role is supposed to be. How are we best able to serve our loving Father? How can we be used for His glory? How can we reach others for Christ?

Once we figure that out, the next step, stepping out in faith, can be very scary. It's the part where we have to put that knowledge of God's will for our lives into action. Ghandi said: "Action expresses priorities." In other words, what we *do* says who we are. We have to take that leap of faith and do what it is we are called to do. No more thinking about "someday." We will undoubtedly fall a time or two—or two hundred!—but God will be there with arms of love to pick us right back up and get us going on the right path again.

I confess that I have never doubted myself more in my life than I have in this ministry, and I know that's no accident. Satan left me alone when I was focused on a "typical career" and "getting ahead." Not that a more normal career is bad, at all, but I was ignoring the call that God had placed in my life. Satan liked that and kept silent. Once I put my faith into action, that's when the games began! Sometimes it's an all-out war! The line "*I'm going to head out to that battlefield knowing your love is going to make me strong*" came from my heart. That's what it has felt like at times, a battle, but that's also what

helps me know I am on the right path. I know Satan would leave me alone if I wasn't trying to impact others for Christ.

I have also realized that everything is in God's timing, which is the hardest part for me. I want things to happen now, not tomorrow! I have learned to cling to verses like Isaiah 40:31: "But those who wait on the Lord will find new strength. They will fly high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not grow faint." Or another one of my favorites, Philippians 3:13, 14: "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Following God's plan for our lives is always going to involve sacrifice, it's always going to involve stepping into the unknown, and it's always going to require faith. That's why it can seem much more inviting to take the easier, softer way. We are called to do more, however, to go where reason and common sense sometimes tell us not to go.

I have described how it has been very difficult at times, and I've often wondered why a woman in her late forties would go into music, a business that thrives on youth. Think Taylor Swift here. It doesn't make sense logically for me to have taken that leap of faith, yet that is exactly where I am called to go, and somehow God is making a way. He doesn't see my age (thank goodness!) but sees only the gifts He placed inside of me. The wonderful thing is He does the exact same thing for you as well!

My prayer, my friend, and my hope is that you see those gifts inside you as well, the beautiful things God has placed inside your spirit, and that you have the courage to step out in faith on the path God has waiting for you. It will be a wild ride, but I guarantee you it will be worth it!

Postlude

Thank you for reading this book and hanging in there with me as I have attempted to explain where the songs on “Grace Finds Wings” came from. My hope and prayer is that when you listen to the songs after reading this book you will have a clearer understanding of the words and the sentiment behind them and that the songs will touch you on a much deeper level.

As I write this, I feel extremely grateful for the path God has placed me on. I have the privilege of meeting so many wonderful people along the way, and I am encouraged by each and every one of you. Thank you for the love and support you give me. In spite of the struggles and disappointments I have encountered along the way, I can truly say I wouldn’t trade what I do for anything.

Abraham Lincoln once said, “And in the end, it’s not the years in your life that count. It’s the life in your years.” I believe when we follow our dreams and live out God’s calling in our lives, the life in our years will be truly sweet!

And though we all are like the butterfly on the front of this book, full of imperfections, trying to find our way through struggles and falling down repeatedly, those are the miraculous times when Grace Finds Wings.

May God richly bless you on your journey, and may you find the wings to fly!

Notes

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3. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/worship> (accessed April 28, 2014)
4. Larry Crabb, *Inside Out: Expanded 10th Anniversary Edition* (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 1998), p. 36.
5. Corrie ten Boom, with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place: The Triumphant True Story of Corrie ten Boom* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell/Bantam Books, 1984), p. viii.
6. John and Stasi Eldredge, *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), quote from back cover of book.
7. Definitions of *haunted* and *magic* used in this chapter come from my songwriting software and thus are a bit unique from standard dictionaries.
8. J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Little, Brown, and Co., 1991 edition), p. 72.
9. Emerson Eggerichs, *Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires, The Respect He Desperately Needs* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson/Integrity Publishers, 2004). The longest quote is from the back cover of the book, with the other references being repeated phrases through this amazing book!

About the Author

Jill Miller's passion is to share her experience, strength, and hope in order to touch, encourage, and inspire others on their journey. She is a singer/songwriter/speaker who instills God's hope to a hurting world. Through her music, which is reminiscent of Amy Grant



and Francesca Battistelli, Jill's powerful vocals are only enhanced by her ability to make her audience feel like they've gained a new friend because of the warmth and genuineness she exhibits on-stage.

Jill has been the keynote speaker at women's retreats and other events all across the country. Jill is an inspirational speaker who talks about how to overcome adversity from a woman who has. The honesty and openness that Jill has displayed in this book are exactly what you will experience at a retreat. Jill throws in lots of humor (you might even hear her rap!), but isn't afraid to get real and go deep as well as she knits together a story of God's love and grace found in the midst of the ups and downs of everyday life.

Musically, Jill has opened for the legendary Loretta Lynn, sang a duet with NewSong, opened for Brian Littrell, performed at the legendary Bluebird Café in Nashville, and sang the national anthem for President George W. Bush and 11,000 people. Jill has toured with Curb recording artist Jamie Slocum, who produced her fourth studio project and newest release, "Grace Finds Wings." This project is a musical study in contrasts, bold and tender, gritty and compassionate. It is a testimony about the marvels of God's irresistible power in

the lives of everyday people.

When attending Jill's live performance, be prepared to feel as if she is singing for you alone. Her performance persona is like spending the perfect summer evening on the back porch with your best friend, where secret joys and sorrows are shared. Jill's willingness to be vulnerable and open about her own life draws people into the warm embrace of her music and ministry.

It is Jill's passionate hope that her music will help others experience Christ in a whole new way and inspire them to pursue a relationship with Him that will bring joy and a sense of peace no matter what their circumstance.

With her eyes focused on God and his plan for her ministry and music, Jill is excited to embrace the future and the people she encounters. Jill's genuine warmth, engaging smile, and joyful energy is contagious. It is those enduring qualities which will invite others to live, laugh, and learn. As Jill says "I want people to leave my shows with the knowledge that God loves them and is with them, no matter what their situation is. I want my audience to feel like they've met a friend along their journey."

Jill is a Regional Workshop Coordinator for the Nashville Songwriter's Association International. She was named Siouxland Woman of the Year in 2008 for her volunteer work in her community, including longstanding relationships with the Siouxland Humane Society and Sunrise Retirement Community. Jill resides in Sioux City, Iowa, along with her husband, John, and four adult sons. Their three rescue dogs rule the house!

Jill would love to be a part of your next women's event or church activity! You can contact her at:

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Discography

My Offering

Butterfly

Christmas Is Here

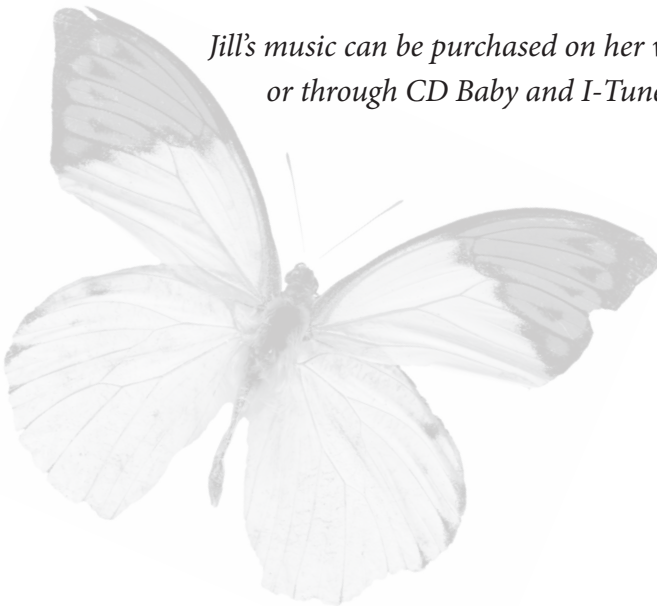
Grace Finds Wings

Stay in touch with Jill through Facebook and Twitter:

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Twitter @jillmillermusic

*Jill's music can be purchased on her website
or through CD Baby and I-Tunes.*



Sign up for Jill's newsletter through her website at
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and receive a free music download.