

In the Middle
of the Mess

ALSO BY SHEILA WALSH

NONFICTION

The Longing in Me
Loved Back to Life
The Storm Inside
God Loves Broken People
The Shelter of God's Promises
Beautiful Things Happen
When a Woman Trusts God
Get Off Your Knees and Pray
God Has a Dream for Your Life
Let Go
All That Really Matters
Extraordinary Faith
I'm Not Wonder Woman but
God Made Me Wonderful
A Love So Big
Living Fearlessly
Stones from the River of Mercy
The Heartache No One Sees
Life Is Tough but God Is Faithful
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Amazing Freedom
The Women of Faith
Daily Devotional
The Women of Faith
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In the Middle *of* the Mess

STRENGTH FOR THIS
BEAUTIFUL, BROKEN LIFE

Sheila Walsh



NELSON
BOOKS

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Introduction



I have a black-and-white photo of my father on my desk. He's smiling, face turned upward to the sun. He's clearly posing for my mum, looking very Rudolph Valentino. Sometimes I talk to him. I know it's a strange confession, but I don't suppose I've been one to shy away from confession. When I talk to him, I tell him I wish things could have turned out differently. I wish I could have shared the truths I've learned, the truths of this book. Maybe it would have saved his life.

He's been gone so many years now, but even still, I'm dedicating this book to him. If I could see him today—just one last time—if I could slip him these pages and a letter, I think I'd tell him the whole truth, and here's what that letter might say.

Dear Dad,

Most days I'm okay, but the messy days, and then the even darker days, still scare me. You knew this feeling. Didn't you?

I used to have a nightmare after you died. I was falling down a deep, dark hole, and no one could hear me crying for help. Only five years old, I'd wake in the middle of the night in a panic, sweat pouring down my back and face, my Deputy Dawg pajamas soaked through. I didn't want to wake anyone, so I'd just open the toy closet and climb in. I'd stay there until the morning, holding Big Billy, my bear, until I fell asleep. I never told anyone.

It was strange how Mum and the rest of the family never talked about how you died. I tried to broach the topic once when I was about eight years old. We were sitting around the kitchen table, and when I said how sad she must be when she thinks about you, she left the table and went upstairs. If I hadn't felt so responsible for how you died, I'd have forced that conversation open. But I couldn't bring myself to do it, just as I couldn't force myself out of the toy closet where I felt safe from my nightmares.

After your funeral, Mum took all your pictures down and put them away in a safe place—a small, locked suitcase under her bed. Memories of you were mostly off-limits. We moved back to her hometown, distanced ourselves from your memory. She cried sometimes but always behind closed doors. We had to grieve and question in our own ways. I think we were all lonely. I know I was.

When I was ten years old, I came home early from school one day when I wasn't feeling well. Mum tucked me in bed, and after she brought me a cup of tea, she sat on the edge of the bed beside me. Since we were alone, I asked her how you died.

She said that you fell into the river. She said the coroner wrote "death by drowning." She'd said it as if you'd lost your way in the dark and stumbled into the water. I think part of what she believed was true. You did lose your way in the dark, didn't you? But it wasn't the moonless country-dark of Ayrshire. It was the dark inside you that made life unbearable, wasn't it?

You were so young—only thirty-four—and you were trapped inside a body that had turned against you. Your mind didn't even have the decency to endure the dark, to stay secreted away in it. In those moments when the red clouds inside your brain cleared, you saw your future, the

shape of it, and it wasn't pretty. I don't know that for certain, but somehow, I believe it's true.

I know Mum visited you after you went to live in that place, but I never got to come. I wish I had. Perhaps if you saw that I could handle your shadow side, you might have been able to hold on a bit longer. I don't know. I just wish I could have told you that I still loved you, that I always had and always would.

I'd like you to know the truth: People don't understand that what children imagine is so much worse than what's true. Now I know. You were broken. Just like me. I know there were days when you were my dad and other days when you became that scary monster lashing out, raging inside and out, lost, alone. The last time you ever looked at me, you weren't yourself and you must have seen how terrified I was. The look in your eyes stayed with me for years, and I wondered if the look in mine pushed you over the edge. But now I understand that's not true: I know your death wasn't my fault.

I live with dark despair too. I have seen how it takes over. And knowing that aching loneliness, knowing the ways it haunts, I wish I could go back and hold your hand. I wish I could fight it with you, wish I could smile at you one last time. Just one. Maybe that would have given you the strength to hold on a little longer.

When I was fifteen, a woman in our church was talking to my best friend about the place where you died. Perhaps she'd forgotten that you had been there. She worked there and said the place was a "house of horrors"—not a place for children. She smelled of mothballs and Youth Dew. The Ayrshire Lunatic Asylum, she said, and I couldn't help but wonder: Asylum? Isn't that supposed to be a safe place with safe rooms? Don't people leave their war-torn countries and

beg for asylum in countries where they know they'll be protected? Why couldn't they protect you? And now, I'm left with only questions, unanswered.

When you escaped that night, did you have a plan?

Did you know where you were going, or did you just want to get away?

Were you trying to find your way home?

In my adult years I willed myself to visit that river. Shadows and silence had nearly killed me. They had dropped me into a place similar to one where you'd last lived. But I couldn't bring myself to do it until I was thirty-six years old; that's when the compulsion to see the water finally became too great. I had to go. I wanted to understand.

When you last saw me, I was five, but I'm now sixty. Mum died last month, and I find myself adrift. I have a caring husband and a darling son, and I'm on the best medication out there, but there are days when it's not enough. Some days I feel as if I live on the edge of a razor and could fall off at any moment. It's hard to say that out loud, because I know how this works: People will want to fix me. The truth is, I don't think "fixed" is what I'm looking for. What I want is what I wish we'd been able to do a long time ago—to tell the truth, first to God, and then among friends, in a community of understanding, for as long as it takes to heal. I wish you could have done this too.

I'm not afraid of pain; I'm afraid of the silence that leaves us all alone. I'm afraid of the secrets that left you all alone. Amid the silence and secrets, it's easy to believe every desperate lie inside our heads, every monster that hunts us. I know you understand that. So, for my sake and in your memory, I'm going to speak up. I'm hoping, I'm praying, that it might give another person the space and the grace to see that it's okay not to be okay. I want to show others how to

find strength in the middle of the mess. I think knowing how to do that is a gift, a beautiful miracle straight from God.

So I'm punching a hole in the silence. I'm kicking in the door of secrets that keeps us cold and lonely. We need a place to show up in our brokenness and still be loved, a safe place where we can come as we are. I'm committed to that now, for myself and everyone who hurts. It's time to tell the truth. We don't have to hide anymore.

I used to believe that I was alone in the darkness. I never was. On the days when I couldn't hold on by myself, Jesus held onto me. I see it now. He always was my safe place. Now, when I feel as if I'm falling, I hold onto Him, and I wish you could have learned to hold on that way. I know, in eternity, that you have.

I love you always,
Sheila

It's okay not to be okay



On the days

when I couldn't

hold on by

myself,

Jesus held

onto me



Chapter 1



Everyday Salvation

*First there is the fall, and then we recover from
the fall. Both are the mercy of God.*

—JULIAN OF NORWICH

Every morning the sun comes up anyway.

—RICH MULLINS

I looked at my face in my dressing room mirror—pale and tired. I was losing weight. I wasn't trying to, but I didn't have the heart to eat these days. I felt sick and cold inside. What was wrong with me?

It was time for my daily television show, and Gail, our floor director entered my room. "Five minutes to air," she said. I picked up my notes, headed out into the studio, and took my seat on the set of *Heart to Heart with Sheila Walsh*.

The lights came up, and the heat set against my cheeks. The director pointed to me, and I opened.

"Hello, and welcome. I'm sure you've heard other recording artists perform songs such as 'Sing Your Praise to the Lord' and

‘Awesome God.’ Today’s guest has written these and other hit songs. But not only is he a writer and recording artist, he also feels a responsibility to be real, to tell the truth, to be genuine with his audiences. His latest album, *The World As Best As I Remember It, Volume 2*, gives us a hint: He spends time thinking about life. Welcome, Rich Mullins.”

The studio audience offered conservative church applause, and the cameras turned to Rich at the piano as he sang, “Oh God, You are my God, and I will ever praise You.” There was something about the way he sang, the depth of his lyrics, and the pain that welled into that chorus; it was as if that aching was just beneath the surface, haunting his music. It was both a comforting and unsettling piece, the kind of song that leaves you feeling raw and ragged. The lyrics bored down to the place where my secret lived, a secret I could never tell.

After playing his opening number, Rich walked from the piano and took a seat opposite me on the studio set. The applause died down, and I asked Rich my first question. “What are the most important things in your life?”

I still remember his answer.

“At any given moment it might be slightly different, but I would imagine that nothing would be more important than becoming fully who you were supposed to be. You know what I mean? For me, that’s what salvation is all about.”

I wish I’d known how profound his response was. I wish I’d dug deeper and asked him to talk more about his understanding of salvation, the process of becoming more fully who we’re supposed to be. I had no idea how much I would need his wisdom in the weeks and years ahead—the wisdom of a thirty-six-year-old musician. Instead, I pushed forward with my preplanned questions.

“How are you different at thirty-six than twenty-six?”

“Oh, I’m very different,” he said. “I have failed enough that I’ve learned that it’s not the end of the world to make mistakes . . . every

morning the sun comes up anyway. I think when you stop being afraid of failing, you become a lot more free.”

Throughout the interview, Rich talked about accountability, community, and the loneliness of not being known. He was speaking to my deepest pains, my deepest needs, but I didn’t quite understand yet. What’s more, I didn’t know how to ask for help. The very idea of being free, of being fully who God created me to be, felt cruel and unattainable.

I didn’t know God had a plan in place to help me understand. I didn’t know that in just a few weeks everything in my life would come crashing down and this would be the beginning of a fresh understanding of salvation for me. I didn’t know that this kind of salvation—the salvation Rich spoke of—isn’t a pretty process. Sometimes it’s a costly, bloody mess.

I hadn’t thought about this interview with Rich Mullins in years, but his name kept coming up in conversations. So I decided to find the interview on YouTube. When I did, I asked my husband, Barry, if he wanted to watch it with me. The familiar music began, and as the show opened, I was transported back to that time and place.

Neither of us said anything for a few moments. Then Barry asked, “Do you see the date of this show?”

“Yes. It’s May 1992,” I said. Then I realized the significance of the date.

“How long was it before you ended up in the psych hospital?”

“Three months.”

“But you look fine. If I didn’t know, I’d never believe you were on the edge of a breakdown.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He was right. I looked very put together and in control, but I was dying inside, disappearing a little more every day.

“I was very good at looking fine. That was one of my problems.”

“It’s not only that. Listen to your accent,” Barry said. “I’ve

watched some shows you taped in 1990. But here, you sound so much more Scottish. I wonder why?”

I thought for a moment, remembering those dark days. “I think I was falling down a hole back to where it all began,” I said.

My interview with Rich was only weeks before my collapse, but I looked fine.

Day after day, I sat with a studio audience and told them that God loved them and everything would turn out well. And I believed this with all my heart—at least for the audience members. But I was utterly convinced that I was too far away, too lost inside myself for the good news to reach my every pain. There were broken places I’d hidden from light so I didn’t have to feel the pain quite so much, but those places were pushed deep into my soul, far away from healing too.

Perhaps I hid the pain because it was in the past, and I knew one day I’d be home with Christ and all my struggles would be gone. I just had to hang on until then. I believed the past was taken care of and the future was secure. But I didn’t know how to live fully saved, fully myself, fully in the present. I didn’t understand what Rich meant when he said salvation is found in becoming fully who you are supposed to be—*right now, in the present*.

I wonder how many people live the same way. How many of our friends? Our family members? Our fellow churchgoers? I wonder how many pastors step into their pulpits on Sunday mornings bringing words of life and hope to others while they keep their pain secretly hidden?

Frederick Buechner paints a picture of it: “The preacher pulls the little cord that turns on the lectern light and deals out his note cards like a riverboat gambler. The stakes have never been higher. Two minutes from now he may have lost his listeners completely to their own thoughts, but at this minute he has them in the palm of his hand.”¹

Will he tell the truth? Will he let us into his mess? It’s a hard

thing to do when everyone looks to you for help. The temptation to say *the right thing* is almost insufferable.

God is good.

God loves you.

He is powerful and He is on the throne.

His strength is made perfect in your weakness.

You can hear these words booming from the pulpit, can't you?

The trouble is—and this was true of me all those years ago—many of us already know *the right thing* to say, and we let it roll off our tongues without hesitation. But if we were to stop and ponder, we might find that what is intended to be a helpful reminder can also be a dangerous prison. It can also make us feel that there's something wrong with us.

I wonder how many of my churchgoing friends believe that sharing the broken truth about their lives would alienate them from church? Are they asking, "If God is good, why do I still feel so bad inside? If God loves me, why do I feel so alone, so unloved?"

For years, I appeared on television or stood onstage and talked about the love and mercy of God. What I didn't understand was just how wide and deep that mercy is. I didn't understand that I still needed saving—from the secrets, lies, and pain that haunted me.

My internal pain is difficult to speak aloud because it's so unspeakably complicated. There's no easy way to sugarcoat this. I've been tormented by thoughts of suicide for most of my life—first of my father's, then of my own. Is this a shocking confession? It is to most people, and it should be. But when someone you love takes their life, when suicide moves from the realm of the unthinkable to part of your family story, the demons of that reality come calling.

When I was very young I didn't think about ending my life. As a child it was different. I had a recurring nightmare—I was about to be executed for a crime I hadn't committed. I was led down a

long corridor to an execution chamber, which was stone on one side and glass on the other. I could see my family through the glass, but they couldn't see me. They were talking and laughing and couldn't hear my screams for help. I woke up each night, sweating and heart pounding, just as I reached the chamber. I'd crawl out of bed and hide in the toy closet covered in my soft toys until the morning. I never told anyone. It was my shameful little secret.

The dreams haunted and haunted, and when I was nineteen, it all became too much. I was a student at London Theological Seminary, training to become a missionary in India. I didn't realize it then, but I had convinced myself that if I became a missionary—if I did something I didn't really want to do but did it for God—then God would see how much I loved Him. Maybe He'd take away the pain, the torment, the nightmares. But no matter what I did, or how hard I tried, it never felt like enough. The pain and fear never passed. I came to believe that I would never balance the scales; I'd never be able to pay for what I'd done to my family. The nightmares would never stop. And so, I took a train into the heart of London on a dreary English evening. I walked around in the rain for a while until I was soaked to the skin.

My life didn't make sense to me. I loved God and I believed He loved me, but I felt lost and sad. After hours, I hustled to the station to catch the last train, and that's when it happened. I walked to the bridge over the railway tracks and looked down. The voices came: *Jump! Just jump. It'll be over in a moment.*

The voices called, but I woke up to the terrifying darkness of it all. I mustered my courage and called out the only name that I knew would help: "*Jesus!*" The voices stopped, and I stepped away from the edge, from the execution chamber, and back onto the safety of the bridge. Heart pounding, tears rolling down my face, I felt ashamed and frightened. It was the first time I remember the feeling that would become so commonplace in my adult years. I was frightened of myself.

This would be an easier story to tell if it had only happened once, but it didn't. Some nights, I've looked at a bottle of pills and thought how easy it would be to swallow the whole lot. I had other thoughts of jumping, of slitting my wrists.

Thirty years after that night on the bridge those suicidal thoughts remained. Sometimes it would be a fleeting thought, but there was one night when I knew that I was in a battle for my life. I don't remember much about that day, but as evening fell I felt such a weight of darkness on my soul. Fifteen years earlier I had been diagnosed with clinical depression, but that night I began to understand the hellish dance between depression and spiritual warfare.



Christian had fallen fast asleep. Barry could tell I wasn't doing well and suggested I take a bath and relax. I couldn't. I told him I was fine and just needed a little alone time. As the night wore on, the house grew cold and still, and it felt as if evil had crawled through cracks in the wall. The evil seeped across the floorboards and down to my toes. It crept up my shins, up my torso, up my neck. It stuck to me.

The weapon that night was a large knife. I saw it lying on the draining board in the kitchen, and the voices were deafening.

Just pick it up. It won't hurt. It will be over soon. You don't have to live like this anymore.

I walked into the living room and lay facedown on the carpet. All I could say over and over was one name: "*Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!*"

The hours passed—one o'clock, two o'clock. At three in the morning something inside me shifted. I remembered whose I was. I stood up and shouted out, "No!" I picked up a verse I've known since I was a child and wielded it like a weapon, "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13 HCSB).

I called that verse out loud and I believed it. I called on His name

and believed Him. I had been saved from hell and into eternity ever since, as an eleven-year-old girl, I accepted Jesus as my Savior. But that night I needed saving in the present, and I knew it. It wasn't that I needed to become a Christian again; instead, I needed the power of the living Word of God to save me from the present tormentors. And that night, as I called on the name of the Lord, I found Him pushing back the darkness, the evil—all those suicidal thoughts. I felt Him saving me.

This is the truth I would discover that night: Christ came to save us in this present moment. The gift of salvation is God's active, present gift to us, no matter where we are.

That was the night I truly grasped the truth of Ephesians 6:12. My battle was “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” (NIV). And this battle was one for my life.

It's the same in your life, too, isn't it? Even if you aren't plagued by depression or thoughts of suicide, you have your own struggles, big and small. Perhaps you're a single mom at the end of your rope. You feel all alone, and at times you take your frustration out on the ones you love the most.

Maybe you just can't get your head above water financially, and every day feels like a struggle to make ends meet.

Perhaps your own body has betrayed you. Chronic sickness is debilitating not only to the body but also to the soul.

Or perhaps you work with people who make life difficult. No matter what you try to make things better, they seem committed to making your life hard.

Sometimes it's the great, big darkness that swallows us whole. But often, it's the small, daily things that wear us down the most. How can we be saved from the very things that are woven into the tapestry of our daily lives?

Too often the meaning of salvation is reduced to a simplistic

formula. The very question “Are you saved?” implies a once-and-for-all action. In terms of receiving Christ as Savior, asking to be forgiven for our sins, it’s certainly that. And that would be all we’d need if we stopped sinning the moment we became Christians. You just tick the box and move on. If all our brokenness was healed the moment we came to Christ, we’d have no need to call on His name over and over again—but that’s not my story, and I suspect it’s not yours either.

My friend Nicky Gumbel, vicar of Holy Trinity Church in London wrote, “‘Salvation’ . . . is a huge and comprehensive word. It means ‘freedom’ . . . There are three tenses of salvation: we have been set free from the penalty of sin, we are being set free from the power of sin and we will be set free from the presence of sin.”²

So, when you confess your sin to Christ, your past is gone—the penalty paid in full. And in this confession, we also know that Christ secures our glorious, eternal future. This eternal future is one free of sin, grief, and pain. As John wrote in the book of Revelation, “God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will no longer exist; grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer, because the previous things have passed away” (21:3–4 HCSB).

But that’s not it; there’s more.

There is a present-tense salvation, one that’s offered to us right now in the middle of our mess. Salvation is far greater and more present than we imagine. The Greek word for “saved” is *sózó*. It means to save, to deliver, to heal, and to make whole. And that delivering, that healing, is a daily and ongoing process.

Christ can save us from the present experience of pain and shame, no matter how ugly the internal terrain is. To me, my present pain is unspeakably ugly, and it’s been that way since long before the night in the London train station. I’ve kept secrets for so long—still do from time to time. I’ve nursed shame the way a child nurses a blanket. In those days, I didn’t know how desperately I needed

Christ's ongoing salvation. I didn't even know it was available, but as I look back over my life, Jesus was standing with outstretched arms offering it in so many ways, through the Word, His church, and a ragamuffin musician like Rich Mullins. He wanted to free me to be who I was created to be—one who didn't struggle with secrets and shame.

Do you want that kind of freedom? Freedom to be who you were meant to be apart from your own pain and shame, big or small?



You might wonder whether this kind of salvation is possible for you. Can we live in this world without fear of failing and without the shame attached to it? I think it depends on how you define *failing*.

A friend called and told me that she struggled with online pornography. Isn't that something only men struggle with? She told me she'd reached out to her small group the previous year, and very gingerly she'd begun the discussion by saying that perhaps women can wrestle with this temptation too. She took the first step, tried to invite others into her process of daily, present salvation. But the looks of disgust in the eyes of the other women in her group shut her down. That's when it set in—one more year of lonely hell, shame, and bitter condemnation.

She took a risk calling me. I'm grateful for her courage. I told her that her struggle was no different from mine or the self-righteous women who shut her down. I think we fear what we don't understand. We did some research together and found a group of women in her area who understand this dark wrestling match with pornography. Community is saving her. She's not alone.

I have a girlfriend who's an alcoholic. She's in treatment for the second time. If she could move to a world where no alcohol existed, then perhaps she could stop being so afraid of failing again. Once she said these words to me on the phone: "I'm a failure. I'm a

horrible person.” I understood why she felt that way. She’s a mom. Her children have seen her drunk, and her struggles have impacted her family. But though she fell and it wasn’t pretty, she didn’t stop there. Instead, she resolved to get back up, and she’s trying again. She’s wrestling with the beast that wants to steal her days by offering what she craves.

I wasn’t allowed to call her during her six weeks of inpatient treatment. I could write to her and pray for her. Daily I asked Jesus to be present with her through others who understand her struggle, through His Word, and through quiet prayer. She called me when she was on her way home to her family—shaky, vulnerable, but tasting hope. Her greatest fear, she said, would be to fall again after believing she was healed. I told her I believe it’s possible to be healed and to fall again and again. Grace doesn’t come with a sell-by date, I said.

*I believe it’s possible to be healed
and to fall again and again. Grace
doesn’t come with a sell-by date.*

I reminded her of Paul’s promise: “And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns” (Phil. 1:6).

If we are still on this earth, then the work is not finished. God has committed to work with us in that journey until Christ returns. How I wish for a greater understanding of this in the body of Christ. Too often we judge, measure, condemn, and isolate. The gospel of Jesus Christ invites us to sit together in our rags under the wide-open sky of grace. Does that mean it doesn’t matter how we live? No. What I mean is that condemnation and isolation are the tools of the enemy. The Holy Spirit brings conviction, which

draws us closer to Christ. Condemnation pushes us back into the darkness.

We all have struggles, though they look different—booze, anger, bitterness, pills, disconnection from our children or spouse, drugs, discontent with our career, conflict with our boss or neighbor, porn, homosexuality, depression, physical illness—it’s all the stuff of present brokenness. And though we, the church, have little grace for certain struggles, that is why Jesus came. He came to save us for eternity, yes, but He also came to save us today.

I remember the morning I picked up my local newspaper and read the headline that had my name in it. I’d had a nervous breakdown on national television, just weeks after the Rich Mullins interview. I was so ashamed. Lying on my bedroom carpet, curled up in a fetal position, I cried until I had no tears left. I prayed over and over, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry that I’ve let You down.” Although I’ve never heard God’s audible voice, I perceived—in the deepest broken part of me—God saying, “My child, do you believe that I love you?”

That was the most important question of all, the one that’s redefined me. It has never been about me getting it right. You either. We’ve got it all upside down. We see from the earth up, but God sees from heaven down. We see ourselves from the perspective of the mud we’re sitting in, but God sees us through the blood of Christ that washes us clean, in the present, in the middle of our messes. And in His love, He wants to save us—in the present. He wants to give us strength for our broken, beautiful lives.

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You don't have to pretend to like where you are right now. In fact, God already knows where you are. As Psalm 44:21 says, God knows the secrets of our hearts. If you trust that the Father loves you, then you can tell the whole truth.

Even Jesus spoke to God about the hard things of His present life on earth. In the Garden that night, praying in agony so intense He thought He might die, He asked God to deliver Him from His pain, His torment. "Let this cup pass," He said. But Christ finished His prayer by saying, "Yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42 NIV). Jesus showed us what to do when we are stuck. He told the truth but said to His Father: I trust You with the outcome.

We can tell God what's true. He knows that the things we hide—the things we are afraid to talk about—control us in ways we don't even realize. But as followers of Christ's way, we get to say,

I hate this.

I'm scared.

I don't know what's going to happen next.

This is not what I wanted.

I'm so disappointed in myself.

Let this cup pass.

We don't need to pretend. We can say what's true, praying for Christ to come and save us—in any moment, amid any circumstance. And this might be the most honest worship you've ever offered in your whole life. You tell the truth and take the next step to being who God made you to be—a dearly loved daughter, saved from circumstance, saved from guilt and shame.

In his letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul wrote: "But we behaved gently when we were among you, like a devoted mother tenderly caring for her own children. Having such a deep affection for you, we were delighted to share with you not only God's good

news but also our own lives, because you had become so very dear to us” (1 Thess. 2:7–8 AMP).

He was clearly very fond of the people in Thessalonica. He was respected as one of the most influential leaders of the early church, and he left a pattern of vulnerability for us to follow. He opened his life to others. Yes, he shared the good news of the risen Christ, but he also walked beside other believers and shared his joys and sorrows, his struggles and hope. I’ve always found it easier to simply share the good news, but true community demands both the Word and our lives. And that’s my hope for this book: that you’ll see how community has worked out in my life, and how it can work out in yours.

I don’t know what you’re struggling with right now, whether you’re angry or crippled with self-loathing or sadness. Perhaps you have endured dark days in the past, or you will face dark days tomorrow, next week, or next year. But I know this: You are not alone. Even more, you are loved. You don’t have to keep secrets or believe lies. There is a safe place where you can find healing. Would you like to find it?

This is the invitation of this book—an invitation to find healing, to find strength in the middle of your mess. But it’s not just a book about vulnerability, about sharing (or oversharing). It’s a book of practices. It’s a book about confession, about letting go, about picking up the Word of God, which was fashioned for your own personal war with your own personal demons. This is a book intended to give you strength. This is the book I wish I could have read before my meltdown. This is the book I wish I could have read again just before my mother’s passing.



In my interview with Rich Mullins, he quoted his friend Brennan Manning. Rich said, “When [Brennan] gets home, he believes that

perhaps Christ will look him in the face and say, ‘Did you believe that I loved you? Did you really believe it?’ Because if you believe that, it changes everything.”

I considered this quote as I listened one more time to that interview with Rich. I realized that he was saying something that I didn’t understand at the time. Salvation is about becoming who you were created to be—a well-loved daughter of God. I know that now.

I was born to be a well-loved little girl, free of secrets and self-hatred. You were made to be that, too, my darling friend. Do you believe it? Do you want to?

Reflection

Facing the whole truth about ourselves can be very hard, but I know now there is freedom in offering our broken, beautiful lives to Christ. He gave everything for us so that we could be saved. It’s a holy offering to give everything back to Him.

What messes are you facing today? Have you shared them with God—including the ones you’ve tried to hide from yourself? Read the scripture below. What does it say to you about God’s love in the midst of brokenness?

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, “Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”

—1 Corinthians 11:23–24 NKJV