

now
and
not
yet

PRESSING IN WHEN
YOU'RE WAITING, WANTING,
AND RESTLESS FOR MORE

RUTH CHOU SIMONS



NELSON
BOOKS

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Now and Not Yet

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To Troy, my closest friend for the last twenty-five years of this now-and-not-yet life. You've taught me how to steward the right now in light of eternity more than you'll ever know simply by the way you live, love, and refuse to give up.



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Introduction

The Good Life always seems to be running ahead of me. She's just around the corner, where I lose sight of her while tripping on the shoelaces I have to slow down to tie. Sometimes I imagine her high-fiving the smart, savvy, put-together over-achievers in the corner office as they accomplish yet another goal while I'm waiting in the carpool lane. Other times I look up from my endless sink-full of dishes long enough to see the Good Life stroll by, arm in arm with carefree friends, laughing and sipping mocha lattes, and I sigh.

I want to be *there*, not here.

And what exactly do I imagine the Good Life to be? She's unburdened, joyful, confident, and free. She's moved past her pain, troubles, and obstacles. She's purposeful, skilled, and using her gifts exactly the way she hopes. And, perhaps most of all, she feels unhurried and at home exactly where she is—today, right now, in this very moment.

Every day, I think I'll finally catch up with the Good Life, only to find she's eluded me yet again.

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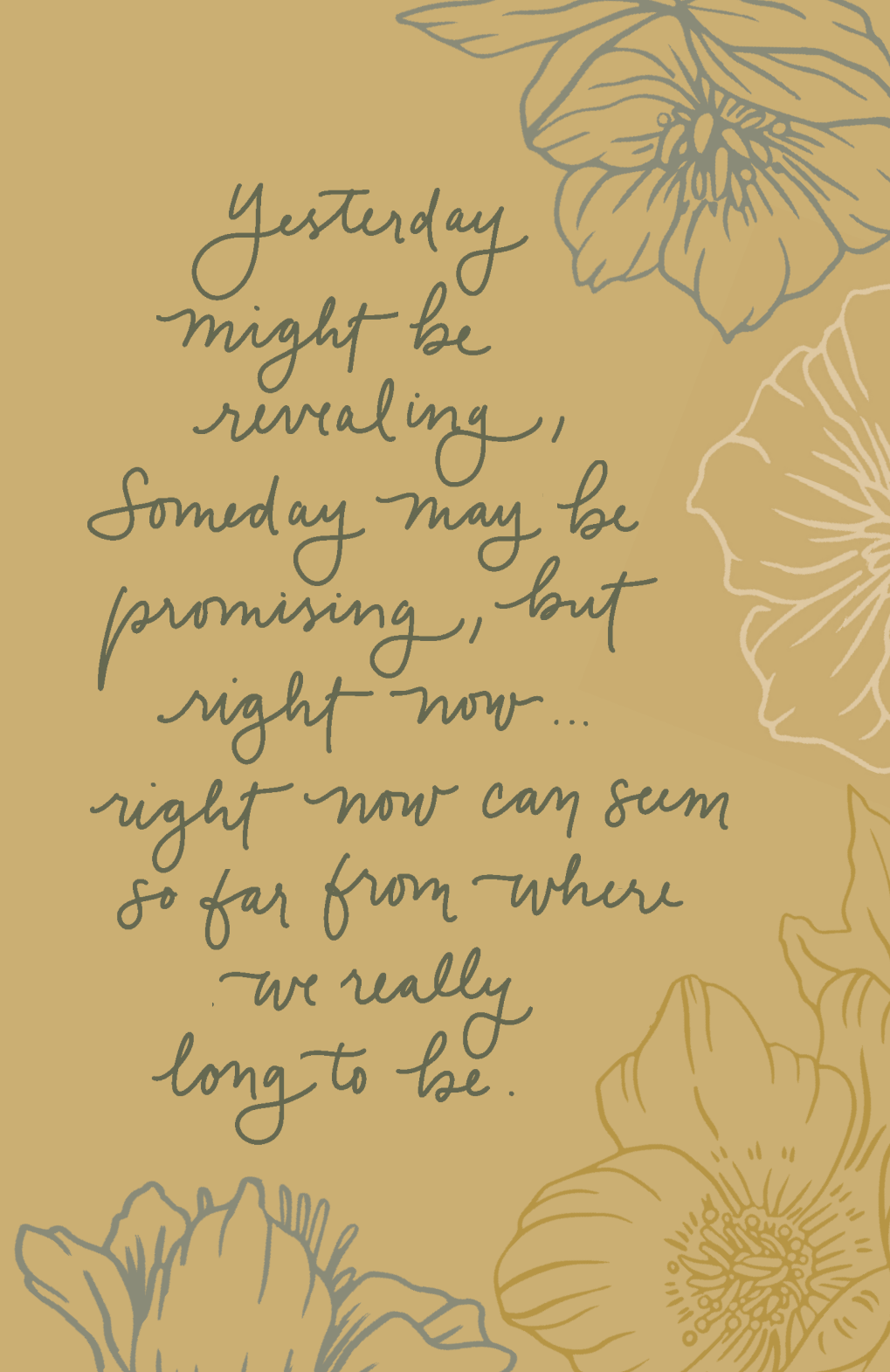
If you've picked up this book, my assumption is that your right now—your life circumstances, relationships, inner dialogues, intimacy with God, progress, daily grind, challenges, or how your best-laid plans have turned out—is not everything you hoped for. Sure, you may be sitting at your favorite coffee shop at the moment, or rocking your sleeping baby on your front porch, or enjoying a quiet afternoon as you begin this book, and this exact moment may feel rather sweet to savor. *Thank God. What grace.* But soon, the moment of ease passes, the reprieve ends, and the reality of life's persistent pressures, disappointments, heartaches, unresolved issues, detours, and all that's not yet wonderful comes flooding into your mind again. You don't know if you're allowed to say it, let alone think it, but you just don't want to be here right now.

I understand that more than you know. I'm with you, friend. And I'm committed to honesty, so I'll just go ahead and say it: *right now is hard; I'd rather skip it altogether.*

Yesterday might be revealing, *someday* may be promising, but *right now . . . right now* can seem so far from where we really long to be.

And where we'd rather be is somewhere where we're . . .

- beyond (the challenge, the pain, the trial),
- seen and known by others,
- not a hot mess,
- doing what we think we're meant for,
- grace-laced and faith-filled,
- joyful in our circumstances,



Yesterday
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Introduction

- working with a shorter prayer request list,
- flourishing,
- on the other side of the life lessons we don't want to learn,
- amid opportunities that display our strengths (not our weaknesses),
- no longer grieving,
- encircled by community, and
- visibly making an impact.

This list is straight from my own journal. I'd rather be there too.

But I'm not there . . . *not yet*. And, likely, neither are you, whatever your "there" is. Both of us are in the middle of right here, right now—with all the life circumstances and heart situations we've been given to work with. The tension created by the gap between what we want our circumstances to be and how they really are is real. And sometimes we struggle to see the point of all we must endure in this current season. I know I do.

I look around and see abundant resources for processing the past and unending resources for achieving the future we might envision for ourselves. But what about right now—the right now we honestly don't quite know how to rejoice in, persist in, thrive in?

Do we need to toughen up and grind it out? Are we supposed to numb ourselves with distractions from our disappointments? Do we trust in ourselves and buy into a system of belief that tells us we can control our own lives?

Or is there a better way?

Introduction

You may be thinking, *Okay, Ruth, are you going to teach me how to create the life I really want? Can you share the secret to being magically grateful for my current realities?* Friend, you don't know how many times I've wished for an Easy button to navigate my unexpected, unwanted, and not-according-to-plan circumstances. I wish our self-made formulas worked for the deepest longings of our lives, but they don't.

Solutions that treat only the symptoms will never fully heal the pain.

But I do want to offer you something much greater than my best strategy for creating the life you want or a mind game that causes you to have a positive attitude about everything. There really is a better way.

I want to lead you to something more powerful: the truth about what God says about our unwanted and not-yet-wonderful circumstances and how he works in and through them, even now.

If we were having coffee (yep, if you know me, you know how much I'd rather share all these things during a coffee date), I'd tell you . . .

It's okay not to like the right now you've been given.

You don't have to like it to lean into it.

Your right now really matters.

I've learned again and again, in season after season, that God is purposeful about what happens between today and tomorrow, between right now and someday. And I truly believe your current season is not wasted.

The journey we're entering together is an honest one. It will require facing the unwanted realities of right now and choosing to press in and not check out. It means actively engaging with

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things that don't come naturally to us, rejoicing when it's hard, and preparing for what we can't even imagine is possible from our current vantage point.

This book is for those of us who are waiting, wanting, and restless for more.

And my prayer is that we stop hiding behind simple platitudes and quick fixes to our unwanted right nows and bravely step into the ways God wants to change us . . . instead of staying busy trying to change our circumstances.

We can press into all the not yet's of our daily lives instead of just surviving our circumstances until they align with our expectations.

We can know God is at work right now when we don't see the progress we're looking for.

We can stop waiting for someday to arrive and take the next step with what we've already been given.

Your
someday
begins
today.

We can flip the script on the story we're telling ourselves about our current circumstances when we can't yet see all the chapters of our lives.

Friend, your someday begins today. So start where you are right now . . . because this moment matters.



Chapter 1

When Right Now Isn't What You Want

Twenty-one years ago my husband, Troy, and I welcomed our first son into the world. Two years later, I gave birth to another boy. And again two years later, and again two years after that. A fifth boy joined our family another two years later, and a final son was born eleven years after we began our parenting journey. If you were counting, you're not mistaken—that's six sons in just over a decade. We were overjoyed and more than a little exhausted.

During that season, Troy was a pastor of a church plant as well as the headmaster of a school we helped found. We also moved into and remodeled three homes, started a website, and then started a business, all within the same decade. (For the record, I do *not* recommend this.) We were optimistic, ambitious, and full of energy. We had so much vision for what was

Now and Not Yet

yet to come: a finished home, a healthy church, an established school, easier days ahead in marriage and parenting, fulfilling and purposeful use of our giftings, and more time, money, and resources. Someday.

So imagine my disappointment when motherhood didn't come naturally to me but instead kept revealing more and more of my impatience, selfishness, and lack of self-control.

Or when marriage felt impossibly difficult.

Or when I felt capsized by ministry hurt while trying to keep my head above water.

Or when my college education seemed to be wasted on sweeping up Cheerios.

Or when *someday when I have more time* never came, and my lack of consistency with God and in reading his Word began to leave me feeling empty, distant, and ashamed.

Or when messy family relationships and friendships didn't resolve neatly, and I had no choice but to pursue what I could when other paths to peace were not available.

Imagine waking up to a reality that isn't all that you hoped it would be.

My guess is that you don't have to imagine; you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Even if our life seasons and stories aren't the same, we all know what it is to long for what is not yet ours. We know how it feels to want something other than what we have right in front of us. I don't know about you, but I am often so ready to be on the other side of my right-now circumstances and fully thriving in what I think is so much more, so much better, that I can't yet see or taste in the now.

People say gratitude turns what you have into enough, but

When Right Now Isn't What You Want

isn't living out that paradigm such a mystery? How can you be happy in your *right now* when your *not yet* feels so far away?

I hope you're reading this vulnerable confession and nodding in agreement. Of course, I don't wish for you to be angsty or uncomfortable in your current situation; I just hope that you, dear reader, understand what it feels like to wrestle with today. To feel so done with your right now.

The Parts We'd Rather Skip

"I'm so done with this," I complained. It was maybe 2010. I was so deep in the little years I could barely keep track of birthdays. I just knew that I had a whole bunch of littles, likely under eight years of age. These words—most often kept in my journal—I muttered aloud that day to Troy after one of our six young sons accidentally dropped a Costco-sized jar of bread-and-butter pickles on the tile floor.

The pickles had been added to the cart as a treat, a non-essential on a tight grocery budget. They were just pickles, but for me (a young mom who had successfully made it home from a tiring trip to the store), tears of defeat were the natural response in the moment. A kaleidoscope of shattered glass radiated across the kitchen floor, and a river of sticky, sweet brine slithered and pooled under the kitchen island while the baby splashed in a puddle and another mancub stepped into the syrupy mess and tracked size-one footprints throughout the house before anyone noticed and snatched him up.

It wasn't a tragedy; it was an accident we could laugh about later. But for an exhausted mom who, in her quiet moments,

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couldn't make sense of why God would give her six little boys in the first place (when she had pictured herself with a tidy and seemingly manageable one-boy-and-one-girl combo), this pickle jar debacle added to a long list of *not what I wanted*, *not what I hoped for*, and *more than I can endure*.

“Come on, really?” I protested. *Is this necessary, God? Do I really need to be here right now? Can we skip to the good part?*

If any of the work-in-progress areas of my life in that season—parenting, ministry, marriage, friendships—had been packaged as Home Depot growing kits, the instructions would've appropriately said, “Just add tireless work and lots of time.” And the warning label would have read, in tiny print,

Warning: May result in conflict, heartache, suffering, and loss of friendships. May experience purposelessness, discontent, chaos, and overwhelm. Results may vary. Serious cases of weakness and inadequacy have occurred.

We didn't have much in savings, rarely slept through the night uninterrupted, and hardly had time to refuel before feeling completely drained again the next day.

For all that we lacked, we did have a robust portfolio of endeavors we had started with an end in mind. With a vision for someday. But now—in the midst of all the realities between what was and what could be—was not what I had imagined, and it certainly was not what I wanted in the moment.

I wanted to hit Next on the control panel of my life. I had prayed for some of these very opportunities. I wanted what God had given me; I just didn't want a version that included unknowns, unrewarded attempts at the right choice, unending

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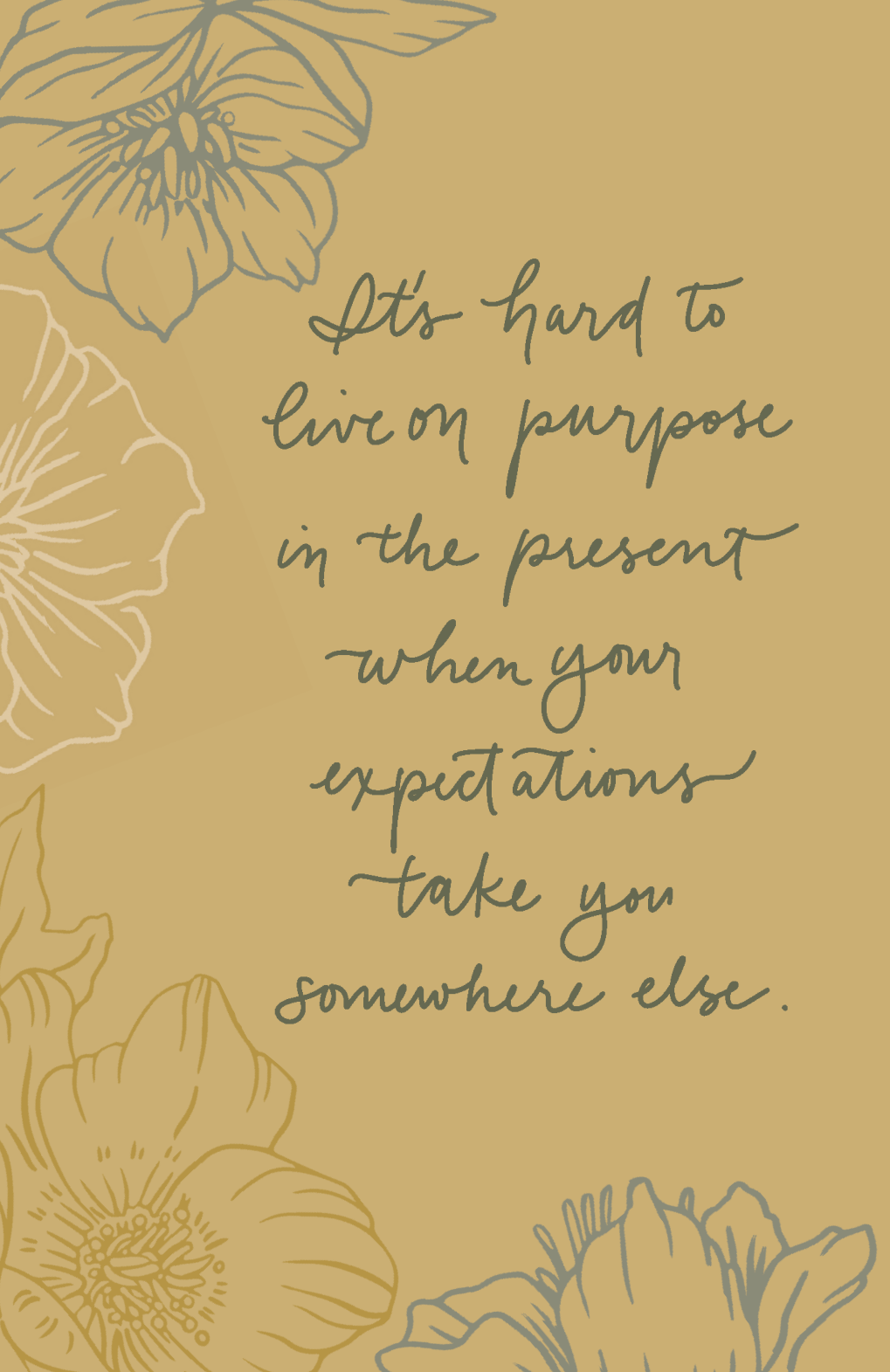
obstacles, struggles with my own weaknesses, and a restless lack of fulfillment. I didn't want to feel those feelings, and I didn't know what to do with those feelings. Sometimes I prayed about it. Sometimes I talked to Troy and trusted friends. Sometimes I scrolled Facebook for too many hours. Sometimes I put a smile on my face and muscled my way through the day.

It's hard to live on purpose in the present when your expectations take you somewhere else.

All I could think was, *If only I knew what God was doing in my present reality, perhaps then I could really enjoy where I'm at because I'd know how my story will make sense in the end.*

This might be a good time for me to confess something I'm not proud of: I'm an impatient movie watcher. I've been known to hit the Forward-Fifteen-Seconds button on streaming platforms to get to the parts I really care about while skipping all I deem unnecessary. *I get the idea. No need for another montage.* I want to know what happens next. And I don't do well with suspenseful plot twists. Of course, I enjoy all the twists and turns after the credits roll. *Wow, that was unexpected! I didn't see that coming, but that was the best part! Oh, now I wanna see it again!* But in the moment? In the moment, I just want to take a bathroom break, even if I don't really need it.

Sometimes I do step out of the room when watching a movie because it's just too much for me to handle. And other times, I've been known to Google the plotline while the movie is playing, to read ahead on what happens next so I can stop feeling anxious about what I'm experiencing in the moment. I



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know. It's annoying to watch movies with me. I'm sorry. You may not believe me, but sometimes I end up enjoying the movie more after I've read the plot summary, when I can settle in, knowing where the film is heading rather than holding my breath while waiting for the stressful scene to be over. My boys can't believe I do this either.

But when I look to the Bible, God's Word written to us and for us, I see example after example of how God intentionally led his people through their impossible current circumstances rather than providing a shortcut around them. Perhaps the most poignant picture of this is in Exodus 14.

God had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, which was a grand display of his power and care. But then Pharaoh changed his mind about letting his slave force go and sent his army after the Israelites. God's people were stopped at the Red Sea while the Egyptians were gaining on them. The end of their flight from captivity seemed imminent—until God instructed Moses to trust him with the way through:

The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. (vv. 21–22)

God, in his power, could've easily diverted the enemy, slowed them down, or given the Israelites a way around the impossible obstacle, but instead, he chose to take them through it. He intentionally allowed his people to face an overwhelming circumstance and cry out to him. Why? Because the God of

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the universe wanted to make a way through for his people. He wanted to put his purpose on display. He wanted to show them that he provides a way where there seems to be no way:

This is what the LORD says—
 he who made a way through the sea,
 a path through the mighty waters,
who drew out the chariots and horses,
 the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
 extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:
“Forget the former things;
 do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
 Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
 and streams in the wasteland.” (Isaiah 43:16–19 NIV)

The Israelites knew well this story of God’s rescue. And we, living on the other side of the cross of Christ, know that God ultimately fulfilled his promise to redeem forever all who believe in Christ from the bondage and oppression of sin and death. God made a way through Jesus, “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), the only way back to the presence of the Father. He made a way so that we could have true rest from chasing after all we think we must do or have in order to be satisfied.

Friend, even if you don’t ruin movies like I do, you probably wrestle with wanting to know the plotline of your own story. Maybe you’ve hit what feels like an impossible point in your story, and you’re so ready for what’s next. You’d love to skip to

When Right Now Isn't What You Want

the good part, the part where you're not holding your breath, the happy ending you long for. Perhaps, like me, you tend to look for a way out rather than a way through.

But the truth is, we don't get a Next or Fast-Forward button for life, and there is no Wikipedia page with a summary of how our current circumstances are momentum for the next part of the story.

It might feel like an unnecessary question, but I have to put it out there: If we are grateful people, and especially if we love the God who gave us life, why isn't it easier for us to enjoy each day, moment by moment, with all its unanswered questions, not-yet-fulfilled dreams, and bumps in the road? Why are we so tempted to skip the present and put our hope in what's next? Shouldn't we be happy and content if we are blessed in some way (and, in truth, we all are, regardless of circumstance)? Doesn't the Bible tell us, "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24)? Why do Christ followers struggle with waiting, wanting, and restlessness amid the messy middle of our lives?

I think it has something to do with our assumptions about God's character, our limited understanding of his ways, and the choices we get to make each day about how to realign and respond to what God says about his purposes, right where we are. When I look at the lives of men and women in the Bible—people God brought into his story of redemption—I see many examples of this very kind of wrestling to embrace and use what we've been given when we can't see how it'll all play out. You and I aren't the first ones to struggle to figure out how to be faithful and fruitful between here and there, the seen and unseen, hungry and satisfied, the now and not yet.

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God is indeed purposeful right here, in the midst of it all. Because I've wrestled with these very thoughts in each season of my life, I truly believe that how we embrace our right now is a perennial and continual realigning of the heart. (Spoiler alert:

How we embrace
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realigning is to return to our God-intended perspective, posture, and purpose as image-bearers—more on this later in the book!) It doesn't happen by default, and it sure isn't easy, but I've discovered again and again that God is at work more than we yet know.

Sticky pickle juice and toddler footprints aren't my current season, and they may not be yours, but the truth is, even though the stream of unwanted circumstances looks and feels different from one season to the next, it is ever-present in the right nows of our lives. There's always something we'd rather skip, a circumstance we'd like to hit Next on. From where I'm writing these words to you, I'm a good decade out from the pickle-jar season, but every right now in my adult life has had equally challenging (albeit different) circumstances I'd rather skip altogether. The heart struggle is the same.

I invite you to take a minute here to pause. Perhaps you've already identified what your current sticky situation is. If not, these questions might help:

1. What unwanted or impossible reality in your right now seems unnecessary and purposeless for getting you to the someday you long for?

When Right Now Isn't What You Want

2. Where do you feel stuck in your current season?

This is not a one-and-done lesson in my life, and I'm assuming it won't be for you either. You have a choice to stay present, to not check out, to press into the unwanted parts of your story that are happening right now even if they don't feel purposeful or productive. The most life-transforming practices are ones that take time. They change your mind before they change your course.

Missionary and author Elisabeth Elliot wisely said, "The secret is Christ in *me*, not me in a different set of circumstances."¹ God is the God of the way through . . . through himself.

What does "Christ in me" mean for our next step in the midst of our disappointments, dreams deferred, and waiting for change? If our right believing leads to right living (which I believe it does), then we must bridge the distance between what we know in our heads and how we engage in our every day. We must replace our checked-out surviving with a framework for living in the now . . . when it's not yet.

We'll find this and more on our journey, friend. You're right where you need to be. Turn the page, but don't skip a thing.

TRUTH TO PRESS INTO

Even if today isn't what I want, God knows what I need.



A LITURGY FOR WHEN
EXPECTATIONS ARE UNMET

*I have expectations, Lord, buried so deep inside me
that most friends and family will never fully know—
until my expectations erupt, boil over, and spread
to reveal my secret longings.*

*I am neither the master nor the ruler of my life,
so teach me to acknowledge what is true
and submit to*

your rule and reign,

your wise ways,

your timing in all things,

your purpose in pain,

your allowance for disappointments,

your delay in deliverance.

Right now may not be what I want,

but tune my heart to sing your grace.

Even here, where I feel the dissonance

of being out of tune,

let me lean in and listen to the melody

of your faithfulness today,

so that even my expectations are transformed

into longings that reflect your heart for me.

Do what feels impossible for me

but is more than feasible by your hand, O Lord.

Amen.



