

The  
Faith  
to  
*Flourish*



The  
Faith  
to  
*Flourish*

*God's design for a rooted,  
resilient, and fruitful life*

Christine Caine



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An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

*The Faith to Flourish*

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HarperCollins Publishers, Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland (<https://www.harpercollins.com>)

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Caine, Christine author

Title: The faith to flourish : God's design for a rooted, resilient, and fruitful life / by Christine Caine.

Description: Nashville, TN : Nelson Books, [2026] | Summary: "Discover the resilience, peace, and purpose you can cultivate through the symbolism of the olive tree, as Christine Caine reveals how to flourish even in the face of life's darkest times"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025014447 (print) | LCCN 2025014448 (ebook) | ISBN 9781400255252 hardcover | ISBN 9781400255375 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Christian life--Biblical teaching | Olive in the Bible

Classification: LCC BS680.C47 C35 2026 (print) | LCC BS680.C47 (ebook) | DDC 248.4--dc23/eng/20250922

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025014447>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025014448>

*Printed in the United States of America*

\$PrintCode

*To my beloved olive shoots, Catherine and Sophia.*

*Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,  
who walks in his ways! . . .*

*Your children will be like olive shoots  
around your table.*

PSALM 128:1, 3 ESV



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## Introduction

# The Sacred Olive Tree

*But I am like a flourishing olive tree  
in the house of God;  
I trust in God's faithful love forever and ever.*

PSALM 52:8

Standing in the ruins of the sanctuary Pandrosos high atop the Acropolis, where I'd taken a group of friends to see the Parthenon, I did my best to listen to our tour guide. Having hiked the gravel paths to the top of the mount numerous times since my first trip in 1987 and starting to tire from the summer heat, I was definitely beginning to fade. Still, being Greek and being in Greece, I wanted my friends to experience the most Greek thing Greece has going—the Parthenon.

Growing up in a big, crazy Greek family, we had images of the Parthenon throughout our home. I daresay my mum had a replica of it on the end of the mantel that never moved, not even when baby Jesus and the entire Nativity set was brought out at

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Christmas and sprawled across the remaining space. Of course, I would choose Jesus over the Parthenon any day, but back then, as a child, I never would have suggested we move Mum's replica or any of the other Greek trinkets scattered throughout our house, which all paid homage to the homeland and its ancient treasures.

Designed twenty-five centuries ago, the Parthenon stands tall against a sky that's often as blue as the Greek flag or the Aegean Sea—both of which are breathtaking to me. Though constructed between 447 and 438 BC as a celebration for the Hellenic victory over Persian invaders during the Greco-Persian Wars, the Parthenon has always served as a temple dedicated to the goddess Athena Parthenos—the namesake for the city of Athens.<sup>1</sup> Architects around the world have called the Parthenon the most beautiful building ever built.<sup>2</sup> Though it survived the first six hundred years in its original state, it went on to see years of conquests, bombings, reconstructions, and preservation work.<sup>3</sup>

But none of its classical architecture captured my attention that day. What left me in awe was a lone olive tree standing in the midst of sand-colored rock. While my friends had been listening more intently to the tour guide, I had wandered a little and happened upon the tree.

A nearby information plaque labeled it “The Sacred Olive Tree.” As legend has it, every tree that has stood in that exact location can be traced to the original tree—the one believed to have been planted more than twenty-five hundred years ago and, according to Greek mythology, a gift from the goddess Athena herself. As folklore has it, when Athena and Poseidon competed for the patronage of the city, she struck the ground with her spear, and the initial sprig of the olive tree sprouted.<sup>4</sup> Of course, actual history has a much different account, with the

most recent planting being placed there by the American School of Archeology in 1952, after they saved and harvested a four-foot branch from the previous tree that endured the destruction of World War II.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever its beginning, from my perspective The Sacred Olive Tree deserved to be revered. Its existence in such a place was as astonishing as the Parthenon itself. What resilience. What strength. What extraordinary ability to not only survive and grow but thrive and flourish. All alone. Atop the highest point in Athens. No wonder that, for centuries, The Sacred Olive Tree has remained a worthy symbol of the city and an undying and ancient representation of peace, hope, abundance, and resurrection.<sup>6</sup>

And yet, despite all that, I had never really noticed it. Later, on the journey home, I found myself thinking of nothing else, and the more I thought about The Sacred Olive Tree, the more curious I became about olive trees everywhere.

Soon it seemed that every time I opened my Bible, there was a mention of an olive tree or an olive or olive oil. I realized God may have been trying to get my attention, so I decided to do a deep dive into all things olive tree in Scripture, and I was astounded by all I discovered. Through extensive study and research, I found that olive trees are depicted as a symbol of life, as productivity, fruitfulness, beauty, and dignity. They are depicted as an essential source of food, lamp oil, anointing oil, sacrificial oil, medicine, and wood for furniture. What's more, when Jesus prayed before he went to the cross, it was on the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed in the middle of an olive grove! And when the Holy Spirit came as Jesus promised, it was olive oil that became symbolic of his anointing. Yes, I had read

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these accounts so many times, but I never knew the significance of the olive tree in those passages. I never knew that Scripture mentions olive trees, olives, olive wood, olive branches, and olive oil more than two hundred times. I had been reading the Bible for almost four decades, and yet somehow I had missed so much.

The passage that captured my attention and heart during my research process is from Psalm 52. David wrote this powerful psalm when he was on the run and being slandered, lied about, mocked, and laughed at. He was hiding in caves because Saul wanted to kill him. He was alone, exhausted, confused, and ridiculed, yet he wrote, “But I am like a flourishing olive tree in the house of God; I trust in God’s faithful love forever and ever.”<sup>7</sup> Another translation says, “a green olive tree,” and *green* means “flourishing.”<sup>8</sup>

I kept coming back to this verse because I could not understand how you could be attacked, persecuted, feel isolated, run for your life, and simultaneously declare that you are like a flourishing olive tree. David seemed to be saying that we can thrive in life even if our circumstances are challenging, our relationships are strained, our dreams have been shattered, or we are being shamed, slandered, or persecuted. That sounded like real life to me, and I was intrigued by David’s tenacity, strength, courage, and resilience in the midst of chaos, confusion, pain, and disappointment. Was it really possible to flourish despite external circumstances? That question sparked the idea for this book.

I understand that we may never find ourselves running for our lives the way David did, but there is no doubt that every one of us has experienced times of disappointment, disillusionment, discouragement, betrayal, loss, grief, false accusation,

misunderstanding, or traumatic seasons of pain and suffering—be it mentally, emotionally, or physically. Such pain leaves us feeling demoralized, deflated, and depleted, doesn't it? But from what David declared, if we are found in Christ, then we can be in the *midst* of chaos without being in *inner* chaos.

When David said he was a green flourishing olive tree in the house of the Lord, his deliverance was still in the future. But he was so confident that it was coming, he was already singing about how thankful he was going to be. He knew God would deliver him in time because he had done it before. What a reminder for us all: God is with us; God is for us; and God has gone before us.

Wanting to learn all I could about olive trees, I broadened my research to include dendrology—the study of trees—historical information, and even trips to olive farms. It became my routine, as I traveled in my work, to look for olive farms anywhere nearby to visit. So many times, when I'd be standing in the middle of a grove of olive trees, I couldn't help but think of my mum and her obsession with olives and olive oil. She would have been so proud to know I was finally interested in what she considered the most important tree on earth and that I was learning what she was convinced of all along—everything goes back to the Greeks! This is why, in all my travels, I sought to settle once and for all the origin of olive trees, and I secretly hoped they really did originate in Greece like Mum believed. (Of course, that's what I'll always believe, too, but no doubt the Spaniards and the Italians will argue the point.)

More importantly, I found that though not very tall or stately, olive trees are very long-lasting, dependable, and resilient. They display permanence and endurance, sometimes living for thousands of years. They can thrive in the worst of conditions.

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I learned about their fruit, the products made from the wood, their enemies, their medicinal properties, and how to grow and care for them.

I was continually amazed by how much olive trees had permeated different aspects of our lives. Did you know there is a World Olive Tree Day? It takes place November 26. Who knew? And did you know that olive trees have been depicted in art throughout history? They've been the subjects of Claude Monet, Henri Matisse, and Salvador Dali. One of my favorite works of art is *Olive Grove*, which is part of a series of olive tree paintings from 1889 by Van Gogh.<sup>9</sup>

I also found the mention of olive trees in poetry, songs, movies, and historical writings. In *The Odyssey*, an ancient poem attributed to Homer, the description of two olive trees is used to convey a sense of reassurance, letting the reader know of the legendary Greek King Odysseus's safety.<sup>10</sup> I found songs from the sixties and films about justice and political issues using the olive tree as symbolism throughout. I even found a made-for-TV rom-com called *Love Under the Olive Tree* that's all about making olive oil. I'm not saying I watched it all the way through, but I was amazed at the ways olive trees have been depicted in the arts.

In the Nobel Prize Museum in Stockholm, the symbol of the olive branch represents the Nobel Peace Prize. The UN flag features the crown of olive branches circling the globe. The winners of the first ever Olympic games in Athens were rewarded with a crown of olive branches, and in 2004 at the Athens Olympic games, every champion wore a crown of olive branches to pay tribute to the Olympic spirit. From AD 797 to 802, Roman imperial coins featured the Empress Eirene. She was the personification of peace, and she held an olive branch upward in her right hand.

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The use of olive branches as peace symbols has also been extended into treaties. The American Continental Congress originally drafted a document called the Olive Branch Petition to deliver to Great Britain in hopes of avoiding what became the Revolutionary War.<sup>11</sup> And Picasso's painting of a dove bearing an olive branch was used in the poster prepared for the first World Peace Congress held after World War II.

Even olive oil has its place on the world stage in history. In the pages of *The Iliad*, written in the eighth century BC, the Greek poet Homer referred to olive oil as "liquid gold."<sup>12</sup>

Mum never called it liquid gold, but she certainly treated it that way, and she raised me to love it—on everything. She understood that when you get to taste olive oil with a discerning palate, you only want more. I often joke, but I don't doubt it for a minute, that Mum put it in my baby bottle. After all, we were Greek! I love remembering all the ways my mother used olives and olive oil in everything we ate—and drank. I grew up with it as a staple in our kitchen and on our table, eating it on bread, and dousing it on cheese, salads, and sandwiches. You could say I was eating the Mediterranean Diet long before it was a thing. I remember Mum adding olive oil to recipes, rubbing it on her hands, and coating squeaky hinges with it. To Mum it was the cure-all and answer to everything. I feel sure her obsession with olive oil is why, to this day, I can't get enough of it. And I feel sure my love for olive trees began at a tender age, long before I laid eyes on The Sacred Olive Tree and began to understand the depth of their beauty and meaning.

I especially love olive trees when they are in full bloom and the sweet scent of the flowers fills a grove. I have two trees that grow in my front yard, and I get so happy each year when they

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begin to bud. Whether looking at them as I come and go in the driveway or when I plop a folding chair on the lawn and sit under them, they have a way of giving me life. I love to listen to the sound of the breeze rustling through the branches and causing the leaves to shimmer. I love watching the squirrels scamper up one side and down the other and then get into a game of chase. And when the trees start bearing fruit, I'm captivated by the idea that every flower did its best to produce an olive.

I'm excited to unpack the lessons I've learned from the olive tree, which I believe will help you to flourish spiritually, no matter what season of life you're in. In each lesson we'll explore a characteristic of the olive tree. We'll turn to Scripture to see how God wants that same quality to mature in us. And together we'll discover that every part of the olive tree is crucial from the root to the fruit—just like God never wastes any experience we live through on this earth. Every part of the olive tree offers us something to learn spiritually and then to weave practically into our lives for God's praise and his glory. I believe that by the time you read the last lesson, you'll be forever changed by the sacred olive tree.

LOVE,

IS  
*Chris*

## Lesson 1

# Root Yourself in God's Love

Not long ago, Nick and I got to hike one of the trails on my bucket list—the 7.5-mile Blue Trail that meanders through the five villages of Cinque Terre in Northern Italy. Full of twists and turns that hug seaside cliffs along the Mediterranean Sea, the trail is a marvel of engineering with breathtaking views. Some portions of our hike involved climbing up hewn steps carved out of the mountainside and carefully working our way down a steep and rocky hillside. At other times we traversed ancient stone footpaths or newly built ones made of wood jutting out over jagged rocks and crashing waves. For centuries the people in the nearby villages have farmed the terraced hillsides that line the trail. Each level features vegetable gardens, flower gardens, small vineyards, and—my favorite—olive trees.<sup>1</sup>

At one point I walked down the middle of a row of olive trees planted on either side of a stone path, and the canopy the trees made over the walkway felt like a cathedral—albeit not anywhere near that tall. Call it the romantic in me, but it was totally the perfect place for a wedding. But what impressed me more than all the picturesque beauty of the olive trees was how the trees clung to the side of the mountain. Despite the steep terraced hillside and

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winds from the sea, they were solidly anchored in place. That's because olive trees have robust root systems—ones that make them strong and enduring wherever they grow. They often live five hundred years but some are several thousand years old.<sup>2</sup>

Olive trees are known for having two kinds of roots with two specific purposes. First, a thick, strong taproot grows straight down and deep. Second, thinner shallow roots span out in every direction, going as far as twice the width of the canopy of the tree. The taproot is strong and anchors the tree to the earth, while the shallow roots running wide in the topsoil act as a stabilizing force. And both draw all the water and nutrients the tree needs to thrive. Because of this dual root system, olive trees can flourish in the driest of places. If the roots are well established, then they are resistant to drought and can go long periods of time, months even, without rain.<sup>3</sup>

The root system is so resilient that it's capable of regenerating itself even when the aboveground structure of the tree might be destroyed by frost, fire, or disease:

In 1985, in Tuscany, a severe frost destroyed many productive and aged olive trees, ruining the livelihoods of farmers. However, new shoots appeared in the spring and when the dead wood was removed, the shoots became new fruit-producing trees.<sup>4</sup>

I saw a similar regeneration once while hiking the intense fifteen-mile trek up Santiago Peak, the highest mountain in the Santa Ana range in Orange County, California. Several months before, a huge fire had burned more than sixty acres, decimating part of the Cleveland National Forest. But on either side of the trail, new growth was appearing. It was evident that the forest

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floor, as well as all the undergrowth and towering trees, had been scorched black. Yet popping up everywhere were patches of wildflowers and green shoots—sprigs of ferns, grass, shrubs, and pine seedlings eager to become saplings now that they were no longer shaded by the towering canopies that once blanketed the top of the forest. It was so inspiring to see that nature wastes no time in making such a comeback, even after the most traumatic events—and it wouldn't be possible if all the plants and trees didn't have such strong roots running underground, still working to draw in nutrients and water to fuel such regrowth.

In the book of Job we read: "There is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its shoots will not die. If its roots grow old in the ground and its stump starts to die in the soil, the scent of water makes it thrive and produce twigs like a sapling."<sup>5</sup> I love these verses because they give us hope for what seems hopeless in our lives. There is always the possibility of new life and the promise of resurrection.

When we have strong roots—like the olive tree—we can keep growing, no matter what has left us disappointed, disillusioned, or utterly discouraged.

In the same way that the roots of grasses and ferns and trees can regenerate an entire forest, when we have strong spiritual roots that go deep in God, we can live a life of faith, endurance, perseverance, and resilience, moving forward through whatever life throws our way, bearing much fruit and fulfilling the plans and purpose God has for our lives. When we have strong

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roots—like the olive tree—we can keep growing, no matter what has left us disappointed, disillusioned, or utterly discouraged. No matter how much has burned to the ground and appears all but dead, there is always hope of new life.

## The Start of Our New Life

Have you ever taken a cutting from a plant and rooted it? That's what it's called when you attempt to grow a new plant from a piece of another one. Typically, to root the cutting you place it in a small container filled with water and set it under a light—where it can get plenty of sunshine. The objective is for it to absorb the water, sprout its first root, and then grow more roots. When it finally grows a healthy number of roots, you remove it from the container and plant it in soil—in the ground or in a pot. As it adapts to its new environment and anchors itself in the soil, it is considered to be rooted.<sup>6</sup>

To be rooted in something is to be “firmly implanted.”<sup>7</sup> In our spiritual lives, once we become followers of Christ, we are rooted in Christ. When Paul wrote to the Colossians, he said, “So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude.”<sup>8</sup>

That is such a powerful picture! In the Greek, *rooted* is *rhi-zoo*, an agricultural term that means being firmly established in the ground.<sup>9</sup> Being rooted, established, and built up, as Paul wrote, is something that happens *to* us. God roots us in him the moment we surrender our lives to the lordship of Christ, and then he continues to build us up.<sup>10</sup>

But the way we first become followers of Christ includes even more imagery. Paul wrote to the early Christians about how they were now a part of the family of God, and he added to our understanding the concept of grafting: “You, though a wild olive branch, were grafted in among them and have come to share in the rich root of the cultivated olive tree.”<sup>11</sup>

I'll admit, when I first read this scripture many years ago, it left me utterly confused. I mean, I understand the idea of being rooted, but being grafted escaped me. Maybe you felt the same when you first read it. But over time I discovered that Paul used the metaphor of an olive tree—the emblematic perennial crop for many Mediterranean countries for more than six thousand years—to explain to the early Christians how they were made part of the family of God. What's more, Paul referenced both the wild olive tree and the cultivated olive tree—and the idea of one being grafted into the other. Even more interesting is that to this day “two taxonomic varieties are currently recognized: cultivated . . . and wild”—the same two Paul referenced.<sup>12</sup>

Before I explain the spiritual significance of all this, it's important to understand that in horticulture, grafting essentially takes two plants and fuses them together to become one. Together they can share the same rich roots and nutrients; together they can share the same sun, rain, and seasons. Together they can grow strong and bear fruit. Together they can become something they can't be apart. And this process of grafting has been practiced for centuries.

In biblical times the cultivated tree (the strong) was typically grafted into the wild tree (the weak).<sup>13</sup> But Paul reversed the natural order by saying that God took the wild olive tree (the weak) and grafted it into the cultivated tree (the strong). This is

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critical because before we were born again, we were like the wild olive trees (the weak), and now as followers of Christ we have been grafted into the cultivated tree (the strong), which is Jesus.

Basically, Paul was saying there is a spiritual grafting that brings us into the family of God and makes us heirs of the promises of God—regardless of our religious background, ethnicity, gender, social status, or anything else we might think would disqualify us. To explain this further, Galatians 3 tells us, “For through faith you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus. . . . And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to the promise.”<sup>14</sup> Through faith in Christ you and I are heirs to the promise God originally gave Abraham: “And I will make you a great nation. . . . And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”<sup>15</sup> The nation of which Abraham was the father and through whom God chose to bless the earth was the nation of Israel—a people God chose to be his own people,<sup>16</sup> a people who shared a special covenant relationship with God, a people whom God referred to as his own son.<sup>17</sup> God desired for Israel to be a “flourishing olive tree, beautiful with well-formed fruit.”<sup>18</sup>

This is our spiritual heritage as followers of Christ, and when we realize the truth of this grafting process in our own lives, its full meaning has the power to change everything for our future.

## Our Spiritual Heritage

Imagine if we put as much energy into discovering our spiritual heritage—what we have inherited in Christ and what promises God has made to us—as we sometimes do when we attempt to find out about our natural heritage.

## Root Yourself in God's Love

For example, a few years ago my sister-in-law caught the genealogy bug like millions of people around the world, and she went on a quest to find out as much as she could about her and Nick's family ancestry. Nick is the twelfth of thirteen children, and she spent an entire year following up on contacts and connections while building a solid family tree that went back generations. When she shared all her research with us, our daughters, Catherine and Sophia, loved reading through their family history about the interesting and somewhat colorful people who were part of Nick's family tree.

My family tree, however, is not quite so interesting. It looks more like a stick with one small branch, even though I have loads of relatives. This is because when I was thirty-three, I found out I was adopted. After doing a little digging, the only information I could find was the name of my biological mother. Consequently, I have so many questions about my ancestry, but whenever I try to fill in the gaps, I keep hitting a wall. Someday I will probably pursue other options to find out more details about my biological background, because my girls really want to know more about my side of the family.

I imagine there's something inside us all that wants to know where we came from and how that shaped who we are, but the truth is, our natural family history can only tell us so much. It's our spiritual heritage in God that tells us who we truly are and what we have in Christ. "In the first chapter of Ephesians, the apostle Paul lists the spiritual blessings of our inheritance."<sup>19</sup>

"He chose us in him . . . to be holy and blameless in love before him" (v. 4).

"He predestined us to be adopted" (v. 5).

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“His glorious grace [was] lavished on us” (v. 6).

“We have redemption through his blood” (v. 7).

“We have . . . forgiveness of our trespasses” (v. 7).

“You also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit . . . the down payment of our inheritance” (vv. 13–14).<sup>20</sup>

This list doesn’t even scratch the surface of all that we have in Christ, but it’s a start. Because of that, if we got more enthusiastic about digging into our spiritual ancestry, much like Nick’s sister did for their family history, then I’m convinced it would change our everyday life. I know that what has held me strong in times of challenges, trials, suffering, betrayals, failures, heartaches, and attacks on my confidence is knowing whose I am and who I am—something I can find only in Jesus and God’s Word.

## We Are Fully Accepted

When Nick and I first welcomed Catherine into our lives, we immediately accepted her fully and completely into our family. We felt the same when Sophia was born. Initially, all they both did was cry, poo, eat, and sleep—still we accepted them just as they were. They didn’t have teeth; they couldn’t walk; they couldn’t do anything for themselves. But the truth is they didn’t have to do anything to impress Nick or me, much less achieve anything extraordinary. They were our children, and we loved them unconditionally. They had access to everything we had, especially our hearts. To say we were over the moon doesn’t even come close to how much we adored them—and still do.

That’s how God loves us but even better because, unlike

Nick and I who are imperfect parents for sure, God is a perfect father.<sup>21</sup> There is nothing in him but good.<sup>22</sup> And the moment we completely surrender ourselves to Jesus, this is the love and acceptance we encounter. We are grafted into the family of God, and there's nothing we can do to get grafted out. Paul wrote, "He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One."<sup>23</sup>

We are 100 percent, fully accepted in the Beloved—in God's beloved Son with whom God said he was well pleased.<sup>24</sup> "To accept means to receive willingly, to regard with approval, to value, to esteem, to take pleasure in or to receive with favor . . . the Father has accepted us willingly, with approval, with value, with esteem, with delight, not because we have in any way merited his approval, but because his Beloved paid the price in full for our approval."<sup>25</sup>

Let that sink in. When Jesus was on the cross, he was forsaken by his Father that we might be accepted.<sup>26</sup> He took all the rejection, including self-rejection, we could ever face. Therefore, we are not accepted because of our behavior but because of our Savior. We are loved unconditionally not because of our behavior but because of our Savior. We are seen and known and chosen not because of our behavior but because of our Savior.<sup>27</sup> What's more, Jesus is the object of the Father's unconditional love and devotion. Because we are in Christ, we are also the objects of the Father's unconditional love and devotion—and nothing can separate us from his love.

This is exactly what Paul wrote to the church in Rome: "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height

nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>28</sup>

God wants us to truly have this understanding. Another reminder that we are his chosen ones, holy and beloved, is found in Colossians 3:12. In this verse, the word translated as “beloved” or “dearly loved” comes from the Greek word *agapaó*, which comes from *agape*, meaning “love.” The tense used here is significant because it means that God has loved us in the past, he still loves us in the present, and he will continue to love us in the future.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus, not even time.

How important then that we keep our eyes on Jesus, the one who loves us unconditionally and eternally, the one who accepts us no matter what we’ve done or what’s been done to us. But when we take our eyes off Jesus and stop looking to him for our identity, value, worth, and acceptance, we naturally start looking for those things in other places or people. We start looking to our education, achievements, and socioeconomic status. We start looking to our spouses, children, and families. We start looking to our friendships and networks. We start looking at how many are following us on social media or like and share our posts. We place our value, identity, worth, significance, and security in the hands of other people, taking them away from our heavenly Father. And when we do, we lose sight of who we really are and how much we are truly loved and accepted in the Beloved.

I don’t know what kind of home you grew up in, and I’m fully aware that while we all come from imperfect homes, some of us come from ones that were painfully abusive and damaging. I know I did, though my parents—who loved me dearly—had no idea what was happening to me during my growing-up years.

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Whatever homelife you had, let me give us all a loving reminder: Even if your family of origin was deeply wounding and didn't give you a great start in life; even if you didn't have a great family tree full of loving branches who could help you grow and thrive; even if your family loved Christ but still didn't get it quite right; if you are in Christ today, your history does not have to define your destiny.

Your identity is in Christ—not in where you came from, not in what's been said to you, and not even in what's been done to you. You were created in the image of God on purpose for a purpose, and God is for you, wanting to help you fulfill all his plans and purpose for you.<sup>30</sup> Because you are an heir to the promises of God, you have a future, and according to Jeremiah 29:11, it's a future filled with hope. You are a child of God, a son or daughter of the King of kings—and nothing can change that. “And I will be a Father to you, and you will be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”<sup>31</sup>

Even if your parents didn't want you and you were labeled a mistake, illegitimate, or accidental, you are now part of a royal family—the family of God—and you are wanted. And you're certainly not a mistake. “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”<sup>32</sup>

Since it's obvious that we need to be rooted and grounded in Christ to live flourishing and fruitful lives, how do we do that? It's a great and important question. There is no one way, but there are things I've discovered throughout my journey following Jesus that have proven effective for me. I've developed spiritual practices that keep me connected to Jesus, strengthen my intimacy

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with him, and keep me rooted in him. These practices aren't new—they're spiritual disciplines that have been practiced by followers of Jesus throughout the history of the church. In one generation such practices were referred to as "practicing the presence of God." For another, it was called "communion with God." For another, it was known as "setting your mind." When Jesus walked the earth, he called it "abiding."

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.<sup>33</sup>

When we abide in Jesus—when we develop spiritual practices in our own lives—we are feeding our spiritual selves and nourishing our roots so that they run deep. In fact, we could say that spiritual practices are to our roots what fertilizer is to plants and trees. *Fertilizer* is the term for a "natural or artificial substance containing the chemical elements that improve growth and productiveness of plants. Fertilizers enhance the natural fertility of the soil or replace chemical elements taken from the soil by previous crops."<sup>34</sup> When we engage in spiritual practices or disciplines that enhance the fertility of our heart's soil, it becomes a place where seeds can grow into flourishing plants—like an olive tree planted in the house of God.<sup>35</sup>

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The spiritual practices we can incorporate into our lives include the many ways that God's Word says we encounter him—reading the Bible, engaging in prayer, practicing silence and solitude, engaging in worship, being part of a local church community, taking a Sabbath rest, fasting, serving, and being generous with our resources.

One of the most effective ways for us to root ourselves in Christ is to immerse ourselves in all that God says about us—and to allow his Holy Spirit to penetrate our lives with his truth. It's how we renew our minds according to his Word.<sup>36</sup> As you read the following verses, let God's Word begin telling you who you are, and let it root you more deeply in his love.

### *You are loved.*

- And we have come to know and to believe *the love that God has for us*. God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him. (1 John 4:16)
- We love because *he first loved us*. (1 John 4:19)

### *You are seen.*

- I will instruct you and show you the way to go; *with my eye on you*, I will give counsel. (Psalm 32:8)
- *The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous*, and his ears are open to their cry for help. (Psalm 34:15)
- As for you, LORD, you know me; *you see me*. (Jeremiah 12:3)

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### **You are known.**

- *LORD, you have searched me and known me.* You know when I sit down and when I stand up; you understand my thoughts from far away. You observe my travels and my rest; you are aware of all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, you know all about it, LORD. You have encircled me; you have placed your hand on me. (Psalm 139:1–5)
- My sheep hear my voice, *I know them*, and they follow me. (John 10:27)

### **You are chosen.**

- *I chose you* before I formed you in the womb; I set you apart before you were born. (Jeremiah 1:5)
- You did not choose me, but *I chose you*. I appointed you to go and produce fruit and that your fruit should remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you. (John 15:16)

### **You are fully accepted.**

- Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has *accepted you* so that God will be given glory. (Romans 15:7 NLT)
- Then Peter replied, “I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation *he accepts those who fear him* and do what is right.” (Acts 10:34–35 NLT)

Because of all this, you can live like an olive tree, thriving and flourishing, in every season of life. You can say of your life

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what David said when he was running for his life, being persecuted and threatened, and hiding from his enemies: "But I am like a flourishing olive tree in the house of God; I trust in God's faithful love forever and ever."<sup>37</sup>

That is the beauty of being rooted in Christ, of being grafted into the family of God, of being loved by him, of abiding in him and growing deeper roots throughout our lives.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- When we have strong spiritual roots that go deep in God, we can live a life of faith, endurance, perseverance, and resilience, moving forward through whatever life throws our way and still fulfilling all the plans and purposes God has for us.
- Because we have been grafted into the family of God, we are accepted fully and unconditionally.
- God's love for us is past, present, and future. There's nothing we can do to be separated from his love.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Can you identify ways you currently fertilize your roots so they grow deep?
- Can you identify new ways you want to fertilize your roots so you bear good fruit?
- Can you feel that God loves, sees, knows, and accepts you fully as his beloved?
- If you don't feel God's love, what verses can you begin meditating on to renew your heart and mind to his truth?