

SHEILA WALSH

**HOLDING ON
WHEN YOU
WANT TO
LET GO**

**Clinging to Hope
When Life
Is Falling Apart**



STUDY GUIDE

HOLDING ON WHEN YOU WANT TO LET GO

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Clinging to Hope
When Life Is Falling Apart

SHEILA WALSH



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SESSION 1

Holding On When Life Feels Out of Control

I feel so passionately about the message of this book. Life does not give us a quick fix, but God is always moving, always working. I see this now in ways I've never understood before. . . . I have a six-word story now, and it became this book. *Hold on and don't let go.*

Sheila Walsh

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38–39

AS WE BEGIN THIS STUDY TOGETHER, let me ask you a question: Has your life turned out the way you thought it would?

If you're anything like me, your answer is a resounding, "No!"

When I was twenty-one or even thirty-one years old, if someone had read me the script of what would come my way, I might very well have run for the hills or buried my head in the sand (and those would have been the reasonable options!).

Life has a habit of surprising us, doesn't it? And sometimes of knocking us flat on our backs. Considering the staggering unpredictability of life makes me grateful that, as the apostle Paul wrote, "Our great power is from God, not from ourselves. We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4:7–9).

Don't miss this:

Pressed but not crushed . . .

Perplexed but not driven to despair . . .

Hunted down but never abandoned . . .

Knocked down but not destroyed . . .

I believe this with all my heart. In Christ, we are more than conquerors; Romans 8:37 promises this. To be perfectly frank, however, there are days I feel more like the conquered than the conqueror. Can you relate?

If so, I invite you to journey deeper into the truths you read in *Holding On When You Want to Let Go*. In this companion guide, we'll walk together, looking more intently at what God has to say and taking time to connect with Him in study, worship, and prayer.

You may recall that at the end of each chapter in the book, I included three ways to hold on to hope. Every session of this study guide will take you deeper into these sets of key principles. Right now I'd like to reintroduce you to the truths you learned in chapter 1, "Holding On When Life Feels Out of Control":

1. We were not made to do life on our own; we need to let people into our stories.
2. Jesus is still writing your story, and He holds all the pieces.
3. No matter how things appear, God is in control.

I'm eager to begin, so let's link arms and dive into our first truth.

It Is Not Good to Be Alone

When you look back on the year 2020, what do you remember? Masks? Social distancing? Protests and riots?

For many people, 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic became synonymous with profound loneliness. Some of us were isolated from our friends at church, work, or school; others were separated from their dearest loved ones. However isolated you felt, the pandemic experience brought to light a biblical principle that God highlighted several millennia ago: “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18).

This stunning proclamation came after God had created a glorious world of sea, land, and sky, all teeming with life. With the advent of stars and planets, dragonflies and dolphins, God pronounced, “It is good.” And it was.

Then the Lord made man in His own image, filling Adam with dignity and divine purpose. Adam enjoyed unbroken fellowship with God in the garden He had designed. What could possibly be wrong with this picture? Our Lord identified only one thing as “not good”: isolation.

The man was not meant to be alone. And neither were you.

TRUTH #1: We were not made to do life on our own; we need to let people into our stories.

How do you respond to this truth? What thoughts or memories does it bring up for you? Take a moment to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal how you feel about needing others, then write your response in the space below.

In *Holding On When You Want to Let Go*, I shared a bit of my own pandemic experience with you. It was a difficult time for me, with thirty canceled speaking engagements, the financial insecurity those cancellations

created, being separated from my son when he contracted the coronavirus, and the weight of anxiety that increased as the year dragged on. I also wrote about my journey *out* of that place. I discovered anew, as the verse with which I opened this session declares, that nothing can separate me from the love of God. *Nothing*.

I also relearned why God gave us so many “one another” statements in the Bible.

Pray for one another . . .

Love one another . . .

Bear one another’s burdens . . .

We need one another . . . desperately! As I wrote in chapter 1, “I know now in a way I’ve never understood before that when our hearts are broken, we need to be able to say it out loud. If we don’t, we sink deeper and deeper into the pit. We need each other. We need to let people into our pain when it is too much to carry by ourselves.”¹

Is it easy or difficult for you to let people into your pain? Why?

If it is difficult for you to let people in, turn your answer into a prayer of confession. Then ask the Lord to move you toward healing and hope. If allowing people in is easy for you, turn your answer into a prayer of gratitude and lift up your brothers and sisters who struggle in this area. Use the space below (and the margins too, if you need them!). Prayer—for ourselves and for others—is one of the main ways we hold on to Jesus in hope.

Lay Your Burdens Down

In Galatians 6:2, God commands, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (ESV). As you may remember, the Greek word used here for “burden” (*baros*) literally means “a heavy weight or stone someone is required to carry for a long distance.”

Can’t you just *feel* it? The weight of unexpected sickness. The weight of uninvited sorrow. The weight of unresolved conflict. The weight of secret shame. God did not design us to carry these burdens by ourselves.

It’s quite rare to experience a season with no burdens. If that’s where you are today, I rejoice with you. If, however, you are carrying a heavy load, I’d like to offer you the chance to put it down. “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you,” 1 Peter 5:7 (NIV) affirms.

In the space below, unburden yourself to the Lord. Use as many or as few words as you need to lay your burden in the arms of your loving Savior, Jesus.

I love the Word of God. It has literally saved my life, so when I study it, I love to dig deep using various translations. That’s not as hard as you might imagine. I use my English Standard Version Study Bible for the helpful notes. I love the readability of the New Living Translation. And I also enjoy The Message, which renders biblical language in such beautiful, accessible ways. For example, take a moment to read this well-known passage from Matthew as written in The Message:

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

How might your life be different if you kept company with God, learning to live freely and lightly in the unforced rhythms of grace?

Now that we've had an opportunity to unburden ourselves to Jesus, let's return to the words of Galatians 6:2, which command us to help carry one another's troubles.

Let me ask you a personal question: Have you ever considered that this verse implies not only that we must help bear the burdens of others but also that we must allow others to help bear our burdens? How do you respond to this?

During a group counseling session, I was once asked to use modeling clay to tell part of my story. I resisted at first (let's just say I don't have a natural affinity for sculpting), but being the obedient girl I am, I eventually gave in and started molding. When I was done, I discovered that I had made a little girl with abnormally long arms surrounded by a high wall. Without intending to, I had made a representation of an unspoken belief I carried at that time: I am available to help anyone else, but no one can get close to help me. I'm confident that God, my perfect Father, looked down on the loneliness of my heart and proclaimed, "It is not good for Sheila to be alone." It is not good for you to be alone either.

Dear friend, take a moment to ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind one person with whom you can share the burden you currently carry. Write his or her name in the space below.

Now, here's the potentially scary part. As we close this section of our study guide, send a text or make a call, inviting that person to take a walk or share a cup of tea (which, by the way, is the Scottish remedy for everything from hangnails to heartache) with you. Share any burden you are carrying with the person God brought to your mind.

Reaching out for prayer, letting others know we are hurting, and even asking for help can feel humbling. Scratch that. It *is* humbling. Praise God we have a Savior who humbled Himself and became vulnerable for our sake. Remember what Paul said about Christ:

Though he was God,
he did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.
Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.
When he appeared in human form,
he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6–8)

Jesus set the perfect example of humility. He's inviting you to experience the freedom and power of laying down your pride, your fear, your shame. Today is the day to embrace this truth: you were not made to do life on your own; you need to let people into your story.

Unfinished

The world is divided into two groups of people: those who like jigsaw puzzles and those who see them as a form of extended torture. I just happen to belong to the first group. There's something about puzzles that helps

the disorderliness of my life feel less chaotic. Some years ago, I received a magnificent lion puzzle as a gift and spent a good deal of time putting the pieces together. Things were going splendidly . . . until they weren't.

If your stomach is clenching with secondhand anxiety, you may know what's coming. One piece was missing. And it wasn't the kind of piece you could shrug off with an "Oh well, life is like that" attitude. For goodness' sake, the piece contained one of the lion's eyes! For one shining moment, the idea of creating an eye patch for my lion puzzle didn't seem too bizarre.

Despite my best efforts and a whole-house cleaning, I simply could not find that piece. Imagine my shock and awe when, *two years later*, I found the mangled puzzle piece buried inside my dog's toy basket. Even though I now had the piece, I was not able to fit it together with the rest of the puzzle.

I don't know many people who like incomplete or unfinished things.

When it comes to the adventure of faith, however, the word *unfinished* takes on an entirely different meaning. As one scholar described it, "The unfinished quality of our lives is a blessing. It assures that, if nothing can be perfectly accomplished for and by us here and now, then nothing can be definitively lost or missed, and nothing is totally irreparable. . . . The word unfinished suggests infinite. It is a call to a road never closed and barren, a road wide open to life, to everlasting life."²

The fact that neither your story nor mine is finished truly is a blessing. No matter how painful the past, no matter how dire the present circumstances, no matter how bleak the future looks, nothing is beyond the scope of God's redemptive power.

Look up Jeremiah 32:17 and write it in the space below.

Isn't that good news? *Nothing* is too hard for our almighty God! In the Savior's hands, the puzzle of your life has no missing pieces.

Let's focus for a few moments on this second powerful truth:

TRUTH #2: Jesus is still writing your story, and He holds all the pieces.

The trouble is our feelings often tell us a different story, don't they? We can't see a way out of a particular situation, we don't know how a relationship can ever be mended, we can't imagine how a debt will be paid or a sickness healed. These are the times we need to run to our heavenly Father. Jesus is writing your story, and He won't stop until all the pieces are brought together. He is at work, even when we can't see where the path ahead of us leads.

Look up Philippians 1:6. What does God promise in this verse? How do you respond to this truth?

Psalm 18:20 declares, "GOD made my life complete when I placed all the pieces before him" (Message). What pieces do you need to bring to God today? If it's helpful, imagine your life as a jigsaw puzzle and picture what pieces appear to be missing. In prayer, place the pieces before your loving Abba (Jesus's affectionate term for His and our Father).

Laying Down What You Never Had

Facing the unfinished quality of our lives and embracing the humility of allowing others into our pain can be quite challenging. You've been going

there with me, and I am grateful the Holy Spirit has been our guide. Today I want to look at this one final truth as we close this first session:

TRUTH #3: No matter how things appear, God is in control.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how intent have you been at controlling the circumstances of your life?



To those of you looking for an 11 on this scale . . . I can relate!

In all honesty, when life feels out of control, my first reaction isn't always to thank God that He is sovereign. Instead, I instinctively want to force life back into control. Perhaps, from personal experience, you know how well that goes!

Life overflows with anxiety-producing, out-of-control circumstances. I don't think it's a coincidence that God tells us not to be afraid well over three hundred times from Genesis to Revelation. By numeric count, the Bible tells us even more often, however, that our God is perfectly sovereign.

Look up the word *sovereign* or the phrase *sovereignty of God* in a Bible dictionary and write the definition below. If you need help accessing Bible tools, try this link: <https://www.studylight.org/dictionaries>.

God is in all and over all; nothing is outside His control. Indeed, as 1 Timothy 6:15 proclaims, Jesus “is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (ESV). This means not only that Jesus rules over all but also that He is *good* at controlling everything.

I don't know about you, but when I try to control things, the word *blessed* does not come to mind. No one wants to be around a control

freak. No one enjoys *being* a control freak either. People may believe they “have to” control things to feel safe, but trying to control everything is actually a miserable way to live. If you operate under the falsehood that everything is up to you, you live with constant disappointment, constant striving, constant tension.

Open your Bible and read Philippians 3:21. How does this verse describe God’s power?

Paul reminds us that God can bring *everything* under His control. Do you have the power to bring everything under your control? Take a moment to consider how much of life you can actually control. Write what comes to your mind below.

I spoke frankly with you in chapter 1 of *Holding On When You Want to Let Go*, and I’ll remind you here: human control is an illusion. We never could and never will be able to control our lives. We can, however, surrender the control we never had to the God who has had it all along.

If you have ever struggled with control, write a prayer of confession here.

Now write a prayer of praise and thanksgiving to our sovereign God, who promises to control all things and to do it well.

Ask God to meet you in any areas of your life that currently feel out of control. Be honest! Your good Father wants to hear your heart and help you in every time of need. May the words of Hebrews 4:16 help you form a prayer: “Let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.”

Finally, rewrite the three main truths we studied in this session, asking the Holy Spirit to seal them in your heart and mind.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Let’s live in these truths today!