

“I’ve been blessed to see how Julie’s teaching can unhitch a church and family from the crazy train. And I’m so thankful that many more will be challenged and encouraged by this wonderful book.” —Collin Hansen, editorial director of The Gospel Coalition and author of *Blind Spots: Becoming a Courageous, Compassionate, and Commissioned Church*

“In *Unhitching from the Crazy Train*, Julie Sparkman invites us to experience a meal of pure gospel with a garnishing of beautiful humor that causes us to lean in and laugh. The result is that we experience more of our Savior in everyday life and learn how to trust Him for the rest He promises as we walk with Him. We have been immeasurably blessed by Julie’s teaching and have shared it with hundreds of others who have used it to unhitch from an orphan mentality and live in the freedom of belief.” —Susan and Newt Crenshaw, president of Young Life

“*Unhitching from the Crazy Train* is an enlightening, encouraging resource for examining what we rely on and helping us place our trust in Christ. This book has helped me and many I know to jump off that crazy train . . . or to never hop on in the first place!” —Lauren Hansen, deacon of women’s ministry, Redeemer Community Church, Birmingham, AL

“*Unhitching from the Crazy Train* is a book about being, not doing. It is an invitation to embrace the gospel in a lived out kind of way rather than simply a talked about kind of way. It is written in a conversational manner, but there is such depth to every single sentence. By prayerfully and practically engaging in this book you can become more grace-filled and gospel-centered through the refinement of your soul in Jesus Christ.” —Kristen Torres, minister of spiritual development, Dawson Memorial Baptist Church, Birmingham, AL

“If you’re clinging to the crazy train, determined that your performance as a parent, a spouse, or a Christian is going to get you to the good life, this wise book is an invitation to disembark. Chapter by chapter, you’ll inhale the sweet aroma of an ancient invitation, ‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest’ (Matthew 11:28).” —Ray Cortese, pastor, Seven Rivers Presbyterian Church, Lacanto, FL

“*Unhitching from the Crazy Train* is for those looking for a deeper walk with Jesus and longing to invite Him into the broken places of your life. It is for those who are at a place where you realize grace won’t fix you in this life but is simply the power of Christ that enables broken people with broken lives in this broken world to experience substantial healing and progress. Honest, authentic, at times even raw, this book is biblical, grace-centered, and filled with hope in Christ . . . for you and for me.” —Bob Flayhart, founding and senior pastor, Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL

“The teaching and studies by Julie Sparkman have been a blessing to the women of our church and are a staple of our women’s Bible study curriculum. It was a delight to read *Unhitching from the Crazy Train* now in book form! This book provides biblical truths, insights, and tools that help guide our thinking as we learn to come to Jesus, resting in Him.” —Karen Pourcho, director of women’s ministry, College Park Church, Indianapolis, IN

“Jennifer and Julie understand and communicate clearly how the gospel is utterly practical, not just for our eternal salvation but for the daily sanctification that takes place in our messy kitchens, the aisles of Walmart, and bumper-to-bumper traffic. This teaching will challenge, inspire, convict, and encourage readers. I am certain God will use this book to teach believers how to hear, follow, and find rest in Jesus above the roar of the crazy train.” —Anna Meade Harris, Rooted blog parent editor, preministerial scholars coordinator at Samford University (Birmingham, AL), and author of *Fresh Faith: Topical Devotions and Scripture-Based Prayers for College Students*

UNHITCHING *from the* CRAZY TRAIN

**Finding Rest in a World
You Can't Control**

JULIE SPARKMAN
WITH JENNIFER PHILLIPS



NEW HOPE[®]
PUBLISHERS

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

New Hope® Publishers
5184 Caldwell Mill Rd
St. 204-221
Hoover, AL 35244
NewHopePublishers.com
New Hope Publishers is a division of Iron Stream Media.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sparkman, Julie, author.
Title: Unhitching from the crazy train : finding rest in a world you can't control / Julie Sparkman with Jennifer Phillips.
Description: First [edition]. | Birmingham : New Hope Publishers, 2017.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017036548 | ISBN 9781625915368 (permabind)
Subjects: LCSH: Rest--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Providence and government of God--Christianity. | Stress management--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Christian women--Religious life.
Classification: LCC BV4597.55 .S63 2017 | DDC 248.4--dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017036548>

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ISBN-13: 978-1-62591-536-8

N184109 • 0118 • 2M1





DEDICATION

To my family

Wes, Brent, Allie, Julianne, Anna Claire, and Carter

No matter how many trips I've taken on the Crazy Train, you were always waiting for me when I got back.

And to Sally

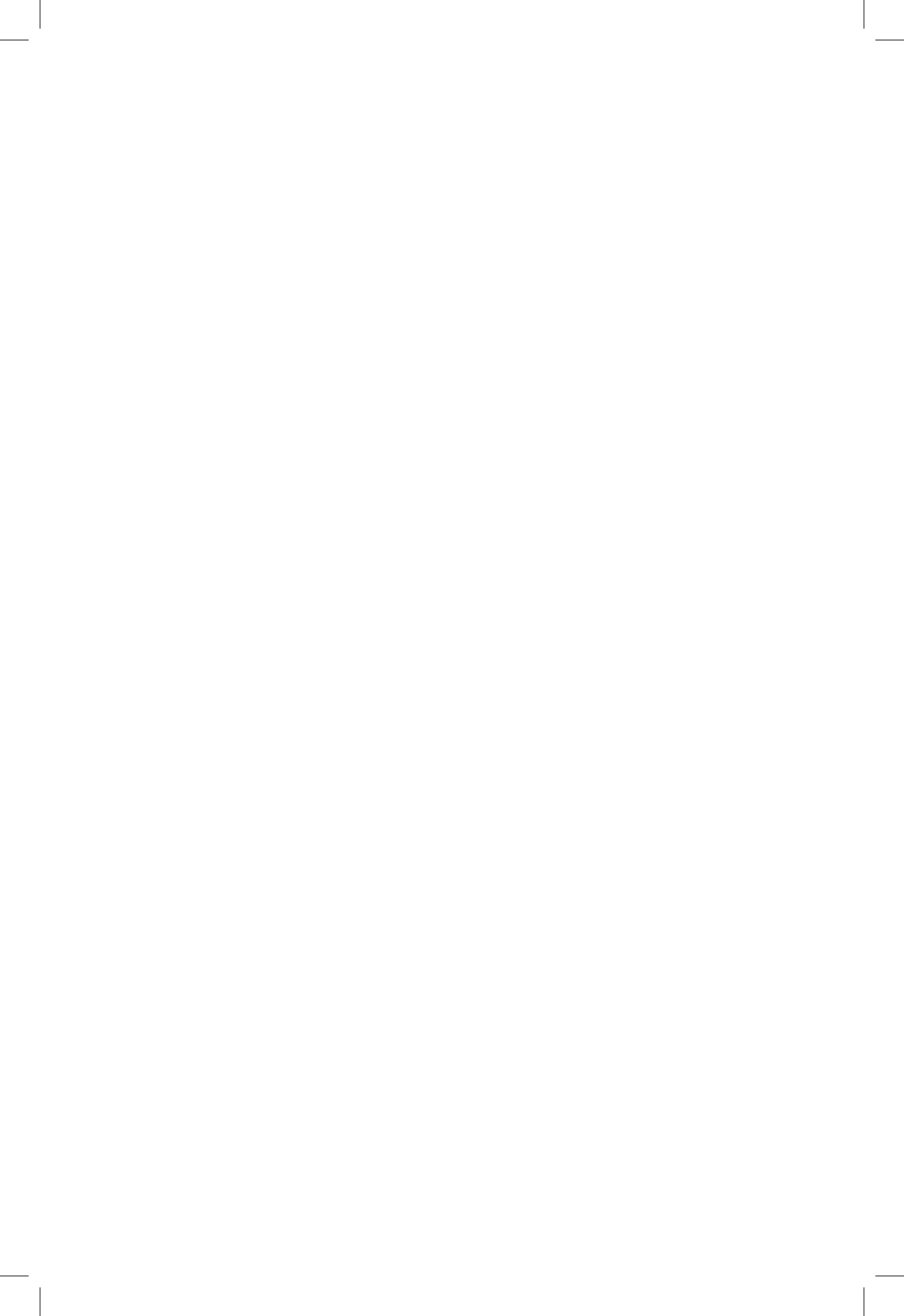
whose faithful and loving pursuit of my heart showed me the power of the gospel in the context of relationship.

I am forever grateful.



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

From *Julie*

The book you now hold is a testimony to the truth that “we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). I have been asked for years if I would ever consider writing a book, and my response has always been the same: “I would rather give birth to a fourth child.” You can never be sure of the good works that God has for you, but He is indeed faithfully preparing you long before it is time to walk in them.

God prepared me by giving me the honor of hearing my clients’ stories as we journeyed together toward healing and restoration.

He prepared me with the teaching of pastors, teachers, and incredibly dear, gracious friends who faithfully modeled the truths of the gospel and loved me well.

He prepared me by blessing me with a husband and children who have unwittingly been my greatest learning lab for life and relationships. They’ve had the courage to be authentic in their love for me and offered forgiveness for my many failures.

And He prepared me by providing a fellow traveler in Jennifer Phillips, a woman who truly lives what she writes. She is as funny as she is deep. Her talent made this project possible, but her heart made the journey a joy.

We were made for good works that we may not see coming but are prepared for nonetheless because He never calls us to something for which He does not equip us. We need not fear; we can anticipate with hope what lies ahead. And we can rest.

From *Jennifer*

I am so grateful to my family for enduring the absurdity of me writing my third book in three years. You have endured my “expressions of stress,” aka, going full on mean mama, when I felt the pressure of this project. Thank you for forgiving me and loving me when I was at my worst. Thank you for encouraging me and cheering me on, even going so far as to fill out prayer cards at church on my behalf. I love you. I pray we will each rest in Jesus a little more every day.

Thank you to all my dear friends who cheered me on during this project, who told me countless times to keep going when I wanted to quit, and who babysat Lucy so I could have extra time to write. I love you all, and I am forever indebted to your thoughtfulness, kindness, and generosity.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, Julie Sparkman, for giving me such an incredible opportunity—for trusting me with your thoughts and your words. Thank you for counseling me from the pages of this book and from the other side of the world during our weekly phone catch-ups. It has been such an honor to watch you live out what you teach as we stumbled through this ridiculously hard task of book writing. Thank you for showering me with grace upon grace, for repeatedly pointing me to Jesus, and for making me

laugh when we were both at our absolute wit's end. Thank you for not firing me when I tried to sneak in phrases like "skillz" and "mic drop." We may write that next book yet: *The Writing of Unhitching from the Crazy Train: The Untold Story*. Love you, friend.

Most of all, thank You, Jesus. To You be all the glory for every word in this book. May You use the words on these pages to draw eyes and hearts to Yourself.



PREFACE

By *Jennifer Phillips*

When I was ten years old, I found out my hero—the great Larnelle Harris—was going to do a concert at our church. I loved Larnelle. His music stirred my young, little soul. I often cried real tears when I listened to his ballad, “I Miss My Time with You,” and he brought a good old-fashioned gospel revival to my heart every time I heard him sing “Amen.” So when I heard he was coming to town, my first thought was obviously, *When will I get my phone call from Larnelle asking me to sing Sandi Patty’s part in “I’ve Just Seen Jesus”?* Surely he would ask me. I may have only been in fifth grade, but I thought, *Our music minister has heard me sing. I’m sure he’ll pass on my name and number. It’s only a matter of time.*

I am not exaggerating. I really thought he would call. Or, you know, one of his people would call. I had to wait 28 long years to get a phone call from my hero but it was no longer Larnelle; it was Julie Sparkman.

A friend introduced me to some material from Julie’s study, *Idol Addiction*, when I was in the middle of an immigration crisis with my adopted little girl. I was so encouraged by the truth in her words that I did the full study twice with women in my church and then followed it up with another one of her lecture series, *Unhitching from the Crazy Train*. To say I was a Julie fan was an understatement. I had never heard the gospel so clearly explained; I had never felt my heart so exposed, yet so loved and free, as when I listened to those two studies. I quoted her all the time and used her flow

charts on my kids, because what child does not want his emotions and behaviors plotted on a whiteboard at the dinner table? Needless to say, God was using the gospel truths in Julie's material to radically change my family and my relationships.

Imagine my surprise when I awoke one morning to an email from Julie herself. She began with these words: "When I read what you write, I feel like you write the way I would write if I could write."

Pardon me? She reads what I write? At the time, I had published one book, *Bringing Lucy Home*, and had only been blogging consistently for a few years. *She reads my stuff??* Stop the press.

Julie went on:

"I would like to turn my lecture series, *Unhitching from the Crazy Train*, into a book. Would you be interested in doing that with me?"

Would I be interested in doing that with her? *Are you kidding me?* I was ten years old again, and the great Larnelle had called and invited me to join him on stage. I couldn't believe it. We got to work right away on a book proposal and were thrilled when it was quickly approved. I jumped straight into the manuscript full throttle. Julie had entrusted her work to me, and you'd better believe I was going to make her proud. I wrote and I wrote and I wrote, fingers flying across the keyboard, convinced my words would be the answer to Julie's prayers. She was going to be so thankful for me. So proud of me. I just knew it.

What do you get when you take someone whose intangible idols are approval and success and throw them into a writing project with their living, breathing idol, whose work has changed their life? The perfect storm of insecurity.

You are going to read a lot in this book about pictures—pictures of how you want life to be, of how you look to people and circumstances to fulfill you. I had a picture, all right. I had a picture of me writing the most stunning adaptation of *Unhitching from*

the Crazy Train, sending it to Julie chapter by chapter, and her responding with all caps and exclamation points, “THIS IS AMAZING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! YOU ARE AMAZING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

That’s not quite what happened. Instead, I sent her content I thought was Pulitzer-Prize worthy, and she wasn’t sure about it. She had questions. She wanted parts written again.

Say what?

You need to know that I am a wee bit of an overachiever. In high school, it wasn’t enough to get an A; I had to get 100 percent—and really, higher than 100 percent, what with honors classes being weighted and all. My standard for myself (when it comes to things I believe I’m good at, not things like baking or Pinterest crafts) is to knock it out of the park the very first time. There is no room for error. My expectation is that I will do a bang-up job, and I will then accept my trophy, thank you very much. So when one of the people I respect the most—the one whose teaching had literally transformed the way I think about my relationship with God and others, the one I desperately wanted to please—didn’t think I nailed it on the first try, I was devastated.

What? Does this mean no trophy?

As I was writing a book about unhitching from the crazy train, I was hitching myself to Julie’s approval with every chapter sent and every email and phone call I received in return. Even though my messages were peppy and confident—“Here’s chapter 4! Woo hoo! Let me know what you think!”—between the lines I was pleading, “Please tell me you love it. Please. Please validate my worth with your response.”

I have never felt as exposed as I felt while working on this project. Every fear, every insecurity, was forced to the surface with nowhere to hide. In a case of life imitating art, I realized my emotional stability was tied to Julie’s stamp of approval. As I typed

about how we are suffocated by our efforts to get life from sources other than Christ, I was confronted with how I had been drinking from the broken cistern of the applause of people. As I described the freedom offered in the gospel, I pled, "Jesus, free me! I don't want to be a slave anymore to my pictures of approval and praise." As I wrote truths of God's provision and righteousness, I said, "Yes, Lord. That's right. My righteousness does not rest in my success. I have nothing to prove. You are enough."

This book was not written from a place of self-sufficiency, as in, "Here's what you needy people need to know about how to do this Christian thing well." It was written from a place of desperation, my idols staring me square in the face, asking, "Who are you going to worship?" As I sat under Julie's teaching once again, this time as coauthor, I begged God to give me the courage to walk away from those broken cisterns and allow His freedom, stability, and rest to breathe life into my anxious soul.

Writing this book with Julie has been one of the greatest privileges of my life but not for the reasons I first thought. What started out as an ego boost because my hero thought I was a good enough writer to entrust me with her material turned into a yearlong process of false gods being revealed and stripped away. Every chapter was an opportunity for God to ask me again, "Where do you place your hope, Jennifer? Is it in My righteousness or your reputation? Are you going to rest in Me?" By walking through these questions with Julie by my side, as my friend, I learned more about God's tender grace and precious provision than I could have ever anticipated.

We got there in the end. As Julie and I persevered through honesty, with a commitment to calling out the best in each other while wrapped in the safety of the gospel, a synergy emerged, producing a quality of material better than either of us could have done on our own. We experienced firsthand that when you are

free from the burdens of expectations and approval, you're free to be the very best version of yourself—who you were created to be, doing what you were created to do.

As you read these chapters and wade into the scary waters of vulnerability, know that both authors waded through them to write it. Have courage, dear friend. Your Savior holds your hand, and His eyes are kind. I pray the refinement and freedom I experienced in the writing process will be your story as you engage with Christ's tender, costly invitation throughout these pages: "Come."



INTRODUCTION

What This Book Is Not

I have a confession to make. I'm afraid the title of this book has misled you, and you're going to resent me for it.

It's an understandable mistake. If I were you and did not know me, I could easily pick up a book called *Unhitching from the Crazy Train*, hear the angels sing as heavenly light glistens off the cover, and shout, "Eureka! I've found it! Here lie the answers I've been looking for! I might as well be a conductor on the crazy train, and this woman is going to help me get off by telling me how to organize my chaotic life. Praise the Lord! I'll take 18 copies, please."

Oh, dear.

If you knew me at all, you would know that I am neither organized nor efficient, so I can't really help you make behavior charts or color-coded calendars. If you bought this book with the hope that I would turn you into a better version of yourself by the end of eight chapters, you might want to return it. I hope you don't.

Honestly, even if I did have great organizational skills, I wouldn't write a book about them. Enough people have written those kinds of books and written them well. No, I wouldn't write a book about how to achieve a life balance so that you can do better, feel better, or act better because I don't think the chaos of life is actually what is making you crazy. I think the problem goes deeper than that.

The truth is, you had a picture in your mind of how you thought life would turn out. This picture is made up of lots of components—your job, your marriage, your children—everything you hope life to be, including your own performance. Sometimes life matches your picture. But more often than not, reality does not match what you hope it to be. So, you work harder; you strategize, demand, and control, frantically grasping at the wind in order to achieve your picture, and you are exhausted.

You are officially hitched to the crazy train. Your mood and outlook are connected to the picture in your head. When life closely resembles your picture, you feel happy and energized. But when reality veers away from that desired picture, it carries your emotional, spiritual, and sometimes even your physical stability along with it. You become preoccupied with corralling everyone and everything into your picture of how things *should* be.

What makes this response crazy is the fact that even as you are engaging in these exhausting efforts, you know they are futile. Think of the speed and size of an actual train. Would you ever try to stop a train with your bare hands? Would you attempt to corral it onto a different track? Of course not. In the same way, we cannot force people and circumstances into our desired picture. But we keep trying, don't we? And that's just plain crazy.

We may not be able to make life and people cooperate so that our picture comes true, but we can choose not to hitch to our picture. We can remain stable and grounded even while we are profoundly disappointed.

More than a self-help plan, this book is an invitation to unhitch from the crazy train. As Christians, we are called to a way of life characterized by sanity, stability, and rest, even though life may not have turned out how we pictured it to be. This invitation will sometimes feel painful. We will peer into some vulnerable places,

touching wounds that are still raw with disappointment. Your true theology might be revealed, the one you really live by, and it may be different from the one you talk about on Sunday mornings or try to teach your children. You may discover that although you say you know the truth, it has not set you free in the day-to-day chal-

lenges of life. Facing this gap between what you know and how you live is essential if you are ever going to understand why you continue to be emotionally controlled by people and circumstances rather than resting in what Christ has done for you.

As these tender places of your heart are exposed, keep in mind that the transformation you long for is no more your responsibility than your God-given righteousness is. You did not save yourself, and apart from the Spirit's work, you are incapable of changing yourself. You can, however, choose to present your heart and mind before God, asking Him to reveal your unbelief, remind you of what is true, and align your heart with His Word. Don't be afraid of what the Spirit may reveal; your Father knows you, loves you, and is for you.

Think of yourself as the buyer of a house. When we were selling our first home, the worst part of the process was inspection day. I cleaned, patched, and painted any possible defect that the inspector might look at a little too closely. I feared the exposure of costly repairs we would be responsible to fix, lest we lose our contract. When the inspector arrived, I was sweating bullets. The only feedback I wanted to hear was, "Well, haven't you decorated this place nicely? I'm sure this won't take me long at all. I'll breeze on through and then be on my way."

When the buyer arrived, his perspective was completely different. He approached inspection day with a keen interest in

*Don't be afraid of
what the Spirit may
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and is for you.*

everything the inspector discovered. He wanted to hear everything the inspector had to say. “What are you looking at over there? Can I see too? What do you think needs to be done?”

What is the difference between me as the seller and the buyer of my home? Why was I afraid and the buyer curious? Because I knew that whatever was exposed, I was responsible to fix; I would have to come up with the resources to make it right. On the other hand, the buyer wanted everything exposed because he wanted to move into a fully functioning home, and he knew someone else was responsible for the money and labor required to make that happen. He knew that even though the repairs might cause a mess in the meantime, the end result would be worth it.

As we journey together to uncover the areas of unbelief in your life, the places where you are trusting in your picture of how life should be instead of in Jesus, I want you to see yourself as the buyer. No matter what is exposed in your soul by the Holy Spirit, God already knows about it. He knows all about your secret vulnerabilities, and He has already begun the process of transformation—a soul renovation that has been paid in full. Allow yourself to be curious in anticipation of what He is up to.

You may feel skeptical right now. You may be thinking, *How can one book evoke this kind of change? You have no idea the things I’ve already tried, and they just haven’t worked.* It’s a tall order, I know. Truthfully, change will not happen as you simply read these chapters. Insight? Yes. But insight, in and of itself, does not lead to change. Insight combined with the Spirit, however, leads to repentance, and repentance leads to lasting change.

I have a couple of tips to help get this material from your head to your heart. First of all, process the ideas I share in this book with someone else you love and trust. Learning rarely happens apart from community, so talk to someone about what God is teaching you

through the truths in these pages. Tell that person how to pray for you as you are confronted with the parts of yourself you'd rather not see; ask that friend to encourage you as you're asked to surrender control and you feel vulnerable and exposed. Enlist friends to pray protection over whatever God is seeking to do in your life so that you don't become distracted, discouraged, or confused.

Second, complete the process questions at the end of each chapter. I often tell my clients that the majority of the work of transformation is not done in my office. In each counseling session, I essentially pack a backpack for them and then instruct them to go home, dump out the backpack, and process with God whatever they heard during our time together. In the same way, it's important for you to know that the words within these pages are not the answer. I am not the answer giver. I am merely a small conduit that God is using to access and change your heart. The process questions are essential. *Do not skip the process questions* because that's where the real work will happen between you and the Lord.

There is much work to do. It is work to get before God and hear Him. It can be relatively easy to do a Bible study; it is work to engage God.

The posture with which you approach the process questions is critical. It is crucial you come to the Father with a heart that is ready to receive. Your job is to show up, eager to learn; His job is to change your heart.

My prayer is that when you reach the end of this book, you will be disrupted. Scary word, I know, but hang in there. When we arrive at points in our lives, big or small, when our reality does not match the picture we had hoped for, it is a true coming of age in our faith. Our response to disappointment provides a window into our soul, and we must be brave enough to peer through the glass. We honor God when we engage Him in our pain and confusion.

Ask Him the questions you thought you never should. In raw honesty, process with Him what you discover. If you don't understand aspects of the message in this book, ask Him to make them clear for you. Trust in Jesus, who will give you eyes to see, but do the work to position yourself to understand.

My aim is not to give you more information but to help you use what you may already know. As a counselor in the Bible Belt, I see many Christians who have been in church for decades. They know how to share the gospel, yet they do not know how to apply that same gospel to their everyday lives. They remain enslaved to the burden of attempting to make life work by trying harder. I'm afraid freedom is scarce in the evangelical world today. *Don't let this be the case with you.* Don't settle for knowing the lingo of the family but never really feeling a part. Press in; be honest before the Father. Ask Him for what you most deeply desire: freedom that can only come from Him.

The journey to freedom is a slow one, I'm afraid. The truths you must embrace to get there are more like an antibiotic than a steroid shot. A steroid shot is fast acting. You feel its effects almost immediately after you take it. We want the gospel to be this way, don't we? We want to meditate on it and instantly feel better. Sometimes that happens, but more often than not, the gospel works like an antibiotic. An antibiotic is taken in faith because you don't feel well right away; it takes a few days. But you keep taking it because you trust the doctor who said the medicine is healing you, even though you cannot see or feel progress.

Trust the Great Physician who says, "If you are in My Word, if you are seeking My face, change is happening inside your heart. I promise. Keep meeting with Me, keep listening to Me, and eventually, you'll see transformation." John 14:26 says, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach

you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” What a relief! Jesus will teach you, and the Spirit will remind you of what He has taught. Accept these promises by faith.

If you stick with me these next eight chapters, you won’t get your ten-step plan toward a better you. You won’t walk away with a new life-management system. You will be disrupted and flipped upside-down. You may feel more disheveled than ever. But you could, perhaps, embrace sweet freedom for the very first time. You might possibly experience the gospel breathing new life into your weary soul.

*Come to me, all you who are weary
and burdened, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.*

—Matthew 11:28–29



Chapter 1

Are You Done Yet?

I entered the waiting room of our counseling offices to greet my new clients, Joe and Jill. As she stood, Jill lifted a full-length, framed photo of her family. I couldn't help but notice how happy the family in the photo looked. From the picture smiled three good-looking kids, arms around each other, along with their very much still-in-love mom and dad, all standing together in front of a lovely home. Joe brought along an equally large framed image. His portrait included himself surrounded by his adoring family and proud work colleagues who were all beaming at him as he accepted a fancy plaque bearing the words, "Atta boy, Joe."

Though it was a tight fit, we all managed to cram into my counseling room. I began our session as I usually do.

"So, how can I help you?"

Jill looked quickly to Joe, who motioned for her to begin.

"I just don't understand how we got to this place. I really thought we both wanted the same thing, but it's obvious to me that I'm really the only one who wants to see our family and marriage flourish. I work myself to the bone for this family with little to no help from anyone. I certainly don't think I ask for much, but all I get are kids who don't want to be with me or each other and a husband who tells me I should stop nagging and be thankful for all he has given to our family. All I am trying to do is help everyone be more of who they can be! Is that so terrible?"

Letting go of the familiar is hard, but results do not lie.

At this point, Joe craned his neck around his picture frame, attempting to enter the conversation.

“Yeah, Jill. That’s right. Nothing and no one is ever good enough. No matter what I try to do for you, it will never be enough!”

This was obviously a well-worn path of conversation between the two. They both turned to me with the unspoken question, “Can you tell him/her what he/she needs to do to conform to my picture? Oh, I know it’s partly my fault too, so can you tell me how I can more effectively *help* him/her conform to my picture?”

I don’t care what counselors tell you about the beauty of a profession that enables you to help others. If we’re honest, there are moments when we wonder if it’s not too late to sign up for night school and become a plumber.

I have spent thousands of hours listening to stories similar to the fictional account above—stories told by disillusioned folks who have pictures in their minds of the ways they hoped life would be, but are living in a reality far from those desires. They bring with them a long history of fighting their reality using the same techniques over and over, with little to no success. Even though they know those methods aren’t working, they are not ready to release them. I get that. Letting go of the familiar is hard, but results do not lie. After clients share how they have coped with their disappointments by attempting to corral and control people and circumstances into their desired outcome, I often ask, “How has that been working for you?” I don’t ask that question sarcastically, even though the answer may be obvious. I ask because in order to be open to a new path toward change, we must be willing to name what is not working.

I would like to ask the same question to you, but instead of hearing my voice, I want you to hear the gentle voice of your Heavenly Father whispering to your weary heart, "How's that been working for you? Are you done yet? Are you?"

"Done with what?" you may ask. Done with believing that if you try harder, you can have that beautiful picture. Oh, I know—we all think we have outgrown the futility of trying to make life work our way. We scoff at quotes like this one attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Emerson," you say, "but exactly what universe do you live in? Definitely not mine, that's for sure. In my universe, all forces work against me all the time. Allow me to introduce you to my laundry pile. And my inbox. And my children." We know Emerson's statement is wrong—we *know it*—because our experience tells us it's wrong. And yet, we are shocked when things don't go our way.

"No I'm not!" you may protest. "I know things don't usually go as planned. Tell me something I don't know!" But let's be honest. When things go badly—from traffic to whiny children to days when you feel as though there is a plot to destroy anything you are attempting to accomplish—do you not sometimes depart from your normal way of behaving? Do you become a different kind of person with a harsher tone of voice? Do you tend to say things you later regret? The universe is not cooperating with your definition of how it is supposed to operate, and you go a little crazy. One definition of crazy is "a departure from normal or desired behavior," and boy, do we depart.

Just in case you are under the impression that counselors are all shining examples of emotional and spiritual health, let me invite you into my world.

It was a Saturday. I had two goals, only two: return a can of paint to the paint store and buy some barstools at an antique shop. These were not lofty goals—it's not like I wanted to run a marathon or race to the top of a pyramid scheme; I just wanted to run a couple of errands. So, I arrived at the paint store, opened my car door, and out leapt—and I do mean leapt—the can of paint onto the pavement, bursting upon impact. Most of the paint—white paint, I might add—exploded underneath my black car. The underside of my car and a good portion of the parking lot were now covered in white paint. *Terrific.*

I took the walk of shame into the paint store, waited in line, and then mumbled, “Paint spill in the parking lot. It’s a big one too.” The employee enacted Operation Paint Spill Protocol because apparently I am not the first person to have a can of paint jump out of her vehicle completely unprovoked. I knew no set paint spill protocol for my car, however. The white mural—abstract style, of course—remains on my car’s undercarriage to this day, unbeknownst to my husband, who I always insist drive because you can’t see the damage from that side of the car.

I departed the scene of the crime and headed to the antique store, determined to check the second item off of my to-do list despite my disastrous start. I spotted two perfect cane-bottomed barstools. I sat down on one to check the comfort level, only to find myself completely sunken through the seat, which had broken upon impact. The first thought that came to my mind was *hide*. Hide anywhere. You must not be seen like this. Run out of the store, stool attached, and then sneak back later and destroy the video footage because you know the security guys will have a field day with this one. “Play it again, Frank! *She’s actually wearing the barstool!*”

I wanted to crawl into a hole and never come out. It would need to be a large hole, what with the barstool attached to my rear end and all.

Needless to say, I lost it. See, I had a picture of how I thought my day should go. I had a picture of the role I would play in my day. I had intended to play the part of the woman who gets things done—the woman who writes things down like she’s supposed to, who makes a plan, and then works the plan like a pro. This woman surely would have known to put the paint can in a box, and she never would have carelessly thrown the paint can in the back of her car. She definitely would have checked the weight limit before she sat on an antique stool. She would have been under the weight limit too.

I had a picture of how my day should go, but unlike Emerson’s inspirational quote, the universe did not cooperate. My reality was nowhere near what I dreamed it should be, and instead of being the idealized me, I was still just me—the woman who acts first, thinks second, and then wants to run away from the mess she has made before anyone finds out.

What would make me act that way? What would cause me to behave like a crazy person? I’m a counselor, after all, and I know you’re not supposed to hide things from your husband, and I know that if you destroy property you should confess and pay for it. I know these things, but what made me behave in a manner contrary to what I know? When the reality of my life does not match the picture in my head, I become hitched to the crazy train. I believe that I can control the people and circumstances in my life and force them into what I want them to be. It is this belief that drives my foolish behavior of hiding, telling half-truths, and losing it, of crying because I don’t think my husband will accept someone who explodes paint all over her car and wears barstools.

What makes you crazy? What makes you say or do things that, even as you are saying them, even as you’re doing them, you know you are going to regret them later? Is it when you host Christmas

dinner for all the family, and you're determined for the day to match the picture in your head, no matter how many times it hasn't lived up to your expectations in the past? No matter how many times you burn the pie? No matter how many times your family gathering looks more like *The Jerry Springer Show* than *Mayberry*? You keep trying to create holiday bliss by working harder ahead of time and planning no-fail family Christmas activities and cooking the perfect green bean casserole, thinking, *Surely it will work this time*. But it never does. And with the sting of failure still fresh in your memory, you reach for your January copy of your favorite magazine and flip straight to the article entitled, "The New You in the New Year," vowing once again to try harder.

Why do we do this? Why do we continue to fall for the false promise of a shiny, perfect dream life? We long for paradise because we were created for paradise. We were created to live in an environment that cooperates with, not fights against, our desires. We were created for Eden, a place we've never been, and so we desire a perfect life full of healthy relationships.

Created for Eden

Desire was created by God before people ever sinned. Adam and Eve had desires and were entirely dependent upon God to grant them their desires. They never experienced need because their needs were immediately met. Their environment cooperated with their desires. Can you even imagine?

God just had one command, though, one directive: "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die" (Genesis 2:16–17). Isn't it interesting that God didn't explain how or why they would die? If I told one of my kids not to touch an apple, the first question they would ask would

be, “Why? Is there, like, poison in it? Explain it to me.” They would want me to explain myself to them because if they understood why, then they wouldn’t have to trust. God doesn’t tell Adam and Eve why. He tells them absolutely nothing. He set it up so they would have to trust in order to obey, rather than agree in order to obey.

Fast forward to Genesis 3 and the serpent is planting a seed of distrust in the woman’s heart. “‘You will not certainly die,’ the serpent said to the woman. ‘For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil!’” (vv. 4–5). Listen to the language of desire in Eve’s response: “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (v. 6).

At first blush, you would think that desire gave birth to sin. Therefore, if we can cut out desire, then we won’t sin. But wait—not so fast. The desire was actually in Eve *before* she ever bit the fruit. It can’t be desire that was the problem because Eve was created perfectly. So where was the breakdown? Eve’s sin was rooted in her doubt in the goodness of God. What the serpent offered her was a way to circumvent God. He might as well have said, “Yes, yes, yes, you’ve got everything you need, but do you really know how long He’s going to keep this up? This childlike thing you have with God, it’s fine for now, but come on—you’re a grown-up! It’s time to take care of your own desires. You don’t have to be dependent on anybody or anything to decide what you need and how you’re going to get it. *Eat.*”

And with the first signs of doubt in her heart, Eve took a bite.

The pattern of the first sin and of every other sin since is this: not desire then sin but desire, *doubt*, sin. The problem is not desire; it’s doubt.

Each day, you carry around a picture of how you long for life to be. This picture is comprised of people (yourself included) and circumstances. In and of themselves, there is probably nothing wrong with your picture because more than likely, it is connected back to your original design in Eden. The picture you have in your head of a beautiful relationship with your friend that's now been fractured is a product of your innate desire to be known and unashamed. Your frustration over your job that never gets done, no matter how hard you work, springs from the fact that in Eden, man had dominion over creation, and creation cooperated 100 percent of the time. There were no leaf blowers in Eden; there were no thorns and thistles. There was no such thing as a muffin top, a bad hair day, a hot flash, or mosquito bites.

And somehow, though we were never there, we remember it. *And we long for it.*

So when I experience a broken relationship, something inside of me hurts; when someone dies, a part of me dies because *it's not supposed to be this way*. Somehow, in some weird way, I live with the memory of a place I've never been. Those pictures you hold of the intimate marriage, the satisfying work, the healthier body, the successful children—they are all rooted back to Eden. When we suppress our God-given desires, we fight against our very design.

From Desires to Demands

All too often, our desires can become demands. We stare at our pictures; we focus all our energy on them. Our pictures grow bigger and bigger in importance until what we want becomes what we need and what we need becomes that by which we define our lives. We even answer the common question, "How are you doing?" in terms of our pictures.

"How has it been going?" I ask my clients.

"Great. We've been getting along better."

"I'm feeling hopeful. I got called in for a second interview."

All too often, our day is only as good as the degree to which reality matches our pictures. Let me say that again: *All too often, our day is only as good as the degree to which reality matches our pictures.*

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Take, for instance, this popular statement about happy—no, let's just call it what it is—codependent mothers: "Every mother is only as happy as her least happy child." That would be precious, except it is a perfect example of what it looks like to be hitched to the crazy train. You might say, "My picture includes a happy child—is that so wrong?" No. That is not wrong. Of course that's what you want. But if you drop into despair and behave in ways you don't want to behave whenever your child is unhappy, then your desire is no longer just a desire; it is something you demand from others and even from God. When you write a scathing email to another parent because her kid was mean to your kid at school, when you bad mouth the coach because your child didn't make the team, when you can't sleep at night because your child is having a hard time making friends, your desire for your child's happiness is not just a desire anymore. Even though you ultimately have no control over the happiness of your child, your emotional, spiritual, and physical stability have become attached to it, and that, my friend, is crazy.

So, here's my question: How's that been working for you? Are you done yet?

I know what you're thinking: "OK, here we go. I'm ready. She's going to say that if I have enough faith, then I can rise above it all, stand in the chaos of a very broken world, and cheerfully sing a

Christian version of “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” I’ll then get inspired and start a blog called “Life Outside the Picture.” After all, that’s the kind of person I want to be.”

Really? Tell me something: That might be who you want to be, but when you’re hurting, is that the kind of person you want to have a cup of coffee with? I know I don’t. When I’m hurting, I want to be in the presence of someone who has been there. Someone who gets it.

The One Who Understands

Jesus got it. The man of sorrows was familiar with suffering and radiated empathy, even though He knew how the story would end. Take Lazarus, for instance. Jesus wept over his death, even though He knew He was going to raise him (John 11:17–44). Why? Why would He be greatly troubled if He knew that in just a few seconds, Lazarus would breathe again? Because Jesus knew it was never supposed to be this way. Sisters shouldn’t bury brothers. Relationships are meant to last forever.

Or take Jesus’ plea to His Father in the hours before He was arrested. Jesus labored in prayer, sweating drops of blood as He petitioned His Father to “take this cup from me.” If there was any other way, Jesus asked for it. But if not . . . He surrendered to God’s will (see Luke 22:42). Usually when we tell this story, we emphasize the part “Yet not my will, but yours be done,” but we can’t truly connect with this statement of submission if we miss how Jesus reveals that what is coming is hard, and He would like to avoid it if at all possible. If we skip over “Is there any other way?” we characterize Jesus as someone who is not bothered by the pain of life, and we think that is how we are meant to be too. We feel shame because that’s not who we are.

“Is there another way?” Here we see a High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15)—who gives us permission to be weak—because He felt weak. He was beaten, despised, rejected, and misunderstood. He bore the weight of the brokenness of the world not with a sunny disposition but with sweat and tears and at times, fury.

“Your will be done” holds a lot more weight when we hear it spoken not through unrealistic optimism but through pain because we know what it cost Him to say it.

That picture you have? That desire that won’t go away? Just because it is not your present reality does not mean it’s wrong. The fact that God is in control does not mean you have to apologize for your pain and disappointment.

“I shouldn’t want a spouse. Jesus is enough.”

“My family is always going to be a dysfunctional mess. Why did I think this holiday would be any different?”

“It’s unrealistic to think I can be close to my teenager.”

No. Of course your desires are valid. Because you are created in God’s image, you long for what is right and good, and you hurt when it is not. Of course you want companionship. Of course you want to connect with your family. Of course you want a holiday that is merry and bright. Of course you don’t want the cancer to return. Of course you want to get the job. *Of course.* If you think your desires are wrong—the desires that actually reflect your design—you will hide and not discuss your longings with God. You will think if He knew what you really wanted, He would be mad at you. This perspective could not be further from the truth because He knows

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what it's like to hurt when faced with a reality that is different from what He desired it to be.

Stop hiding. Stop shaming. Come into the light.

The brokenness of life hurts because you were not designed for it, and while the painful weight of life is not optional, you do get to choose how you will carry that weight. You get to decide how you will engage with it. Just like physical weight lifting at the gym, the way you carry the weight of life will either strengthen you or injure you and take you out of the game.

How weary are you? How are you carrying the weight of reality outside of your picture? Be honest in your answer; take a minute to feel the burden of your weariness. It's kind of unbearable, isn't it?

*Come to me, all you who are weary
and burdened, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

—Matthew 11:28–30

When Jesus gave this invitation to His Hebrew listeners, He was well aware of the heavy, self-righteous burden the Pharisees and other religious leaders had placed on the people through the unobtainable expectations of the law. Like an ox forced to plow a field with a heavy weight on its back, the Jews had been struggling to plow the field of life underneath an impossible standard. Jesus knew they were weary from their efforts that could never be good enough. He was offering a better way—the *only* way to have peace

with God and finally find rest. Jesus' yoke—His grace-filled teaching and gentle care that never leaves you to plow alone—was a stark, beautiful contrast to the weight of the law that left the people exhausted and disheartened.

Jesus extends this invitation to us today, but it is not an open invitation. The rest that Jesus offers comes with a very high cost: in order to receive Jesus' light and easy yoke, you must be willing to lay down your own. You have been plowing the field with a terribly heavy burden. You've been living life your own way, following your own agenda. Your yoke must go in order to receive the yoke Jesus offers. You can't wear both, and He will not force His yoke upon you. He says, "Take it . . . but before you take it, you have to lay down your own."

Are you weary enough to lay your burden down?

We're kind of like the toddler who insists on tying his own shoelaces, even though he is developmentally incapable of doing so. His mother watches him struggle, and although she knows that she could storm over and demand, "Oh, just let me do it—we're in a hurry," the loving thing to do would be to patiently wait until he is so weary of trying that he is ready to receive help.

"Are you done yet?" his mom might ask with a smile, as she bends over to weave the laces with experienced hands.

Jesus tenderly asks, "Are you done yet? Are you done carrying the burden of trying to attain your perfect picture? Of trying to make life 'work'?" And as He asks, He also waits with skilled hands, ready to catch your burden as you shrug it to His feet, ready to give you the deep rest your soul has always longed for. This process is painful; the cost is high, but the rest you were designed for is worth it. "Come to Me," He says.

You may be completely ensnared in the trap of worshipping your picture. *Come.*

You may be disillusioned and cynical, scarred by those who were supposed to love you well, and you just don't trust Him.

Come.

You may be scared to death because you don't know Him well enough to believe He knows you well enough to know what you really need. *Come.*

How weary are you? Are you done yet? He sees you. Come to Him—it's time.

Process Questions

1. What does your picture look like? It may help to think of your picture in terms of segments, such as family, job, friendships, etc.

2. As you clarify your picture, what emotions are evoked? Fear? Hope? Pain? Despair?

3. Can you identify the ways in which you have become weary by trying to achieve your picture?

4. How have you tried to shame or deny your picture (deaden your desire)?

5. Like Eve demonstrated in Genesis 3, it is our doubt in God’s goodness and provision that causes us to behave in ways we later regret. Take a moment to consider the false beliefs about God that led to your responses in questions 3 and 4. Write out a prayer of confession, not for your responses, but for what you believed about God that caused you to respond as you did.

6. The Father is asking you, “Are you tired enough to abandon your own yoke and come under Mine?” Write your response as a prayer.
