

A decorative border featuring watercolor-style flowers in shades of pink, red, orange, and purple, with green foliage. A small blue bird is perched on a branch in the upper left corner.

BECKY THOMPSON
OF SCISSORTAILSILK

HOPE
Unfolding

GRACE-FILLED TRUTH
FOR THE MOMMA'S HEART

Praise for
Hope Unfolding

“Becky Thompson shares the truth of motherhood—the slobbery kisses and the heartwarming moments blended seamlessly with the sleepless nights, tantrums, and never-ending piles of laundry—while constantly pointing us back to the Father who loves us beyond comprehension. In opening up a copy of *Hope Unfolding*, readers are essentially invited to sit down over coffee with a dear friend to talk about the real things in life. Becky is our fellow mom friend who wrestles with the same questions we do: ‘Does what I’m doing matter?’ ‘Can I make it through today?’ ‘Where is God in the dirty dishes?’ In *Hope Unfolding* we are offered space to ponder the truth of God’s Word as Becky offers a perspective of hope, gratitude, and grace in all the moments of motherhood.”

—LAUREN CASPER, founder of Laurencasper.com
and upcoming author with Thomas Nelson

“Becky Thompson’s words are like a good cup of coffee: warm, inviting, and the perfect soul refreshment in the everyday chaos of motherhood. An encouraging, affirming, and uplifting read, *Hope Unfolding* is the perfect gift of grace for every mom.”

—KAYLA AIMEE, author of *Anchored: Finding
Hope in the Unexpected*

“Calling all moms in the trenches. Whether you are up to your eyeballs in diapers and dishes or dealing daily with homework and teens, this book is for you! In its pages you’ll discover a respite from the rush and a dose of hope amidst the heartache that often accompanies motherhood. I wish I’d had this encouragement when my kids were small, and you can bet your sweet spit-up covered sweatshirt that all new moms I know will be gifted one from me at their baby showers. I can’t recommend this grace-filled volume enough!”

—KAREN EHMAN, *New York Times* best-selling
author of *Keep It Shut* and *Hoodwinked*,
Proverbs 31 Ministries speaker, wife and mother
of three

“Becky’s warm and vulnerable storytelling had me nodding yes throughout the pages of this book. *Hope Unfolding* will resonate with every momma who has ever played the comparison game, doubted herself, or just needed someone to say ‘me too.’”

—JESSICA N. TURNER, author of *The Fringe Hours:
Making Time for You*

HOPE
Unfolding

HOPE

Unfolding



BECKY THOMPSON

OF SCISSORTAIL SILK



WATERBROOK
P R E S S

HOPE UNFOLDING

PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS

12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200

Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc.®. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the King James Version.

Trade Paperback ISBN 978-1-60142-812-7

eBook ISBN 978-1-60142-813-4

Copyright © 2016 by Rebecca F. Thompson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

WATERBROOK® and its deer colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Thompson, Becky, (Rebecca F.) author.

Title: Hope unfolding : grace-filled truth for the momma's heart / Becky Thompson.

Description: First Edition. | Colorado Springs, Colorado : WaterBrook Press, 2016. |

Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015036784 | ISBN 9781601428127 | ISBN 9781601428134 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Mothers—Religious life.

Classification: LCC BV4529.18 .T466 2016 | DDC 248.8/431—dc23 LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015036784>

Printed in the United States of America

2016—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

SPECIAL SALES

Most WaterBrook Multnomah books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. Custom imprinting or excerpting can also be done to fit special needs. For information, please e-mail SpecialMarkets@WaterBrookMultnomah.com or call 1-800-603-7051.



*To my husband, Jared, and our children,
Kolton, Kadence, Jaxton, and the ones
who wait in Jesus's arms. Thank you for
allowing me to share our stories. May
they be used to ignite hope.*

Contents

To You, Momma, Before We Begin.	xi
Introduction	1
<i>One More Thing to Hold</i>	
1. Diamonds in the Dirt	13
<i>God Hasn't Forgotten About You</i>	
2. Ordinary Threads	29
<i>God's Plans Are Perfect</i>	
3. A Fight for Joy	53
<i>God Is Good Even When Life Isn't</i>	
4. Is It Just Me?	73
<i>You're Not Alone</i>	
5. You Can't Do It All.	87
<i>Let God Be Your Strength</i>	

Contents

6. Real Life Looks Lived In	105
<i>You Are Not Your Mess</i>	
7. Don't Run Her Race	125
<i>Have Grace for Who You Are</i>	
8. Outside the Box	145
<i>God Still Performs Miracles</i>	
9. The Father's Love for a Momma's Heart . . .	167
<i>God Loves You Just as You Are</i>	
10. The "Good Mom" Movement	183
<i>You Are Enough</i>	
Before We End	203
Acknowledgments.	205
Notes	209

To You, Momma, Before We Begin

*H*i, friend. I am so glad that these words have found you. I don't know if they were gifted to you or if you picked them up while browsing your local bookstore. Perhaps you are reading black pixels across a white screen. However you have come across them, I think it is for a reason.

I imagine you reading these words while you steal a few minutes during nap time or eat your lunch at your desk. I imagine you reading them late at night when the house is quiet—or in the middle of the day when you grab five minutes to yourself while the kids are distracted with LEGOs or *Mickey Mouse*. I picture women just like you all over the world in waiting rooms, living rooms, and offices reading these words. We might not have met, but in my heart (and often in my writing), I call you friend.

We're a lot alike, you and I. We both have fears and worries, anxieties and stresses, hopes and dreams, situations and circumstances that we are going through at this very moment.

We are each in the middle of our own stories. But even though the details of our lives might be unique, I always look

for where they intersect. I look for our common ground to remind us that we are not alone, and that the God of all creation is with us. In this, there is hope.

Take a deep breath with me. Would you?

Okay. Now here's the deal. In a minute, life will continue. The kids will need your attention, or you will have to return to work. There will be e-mails to respond to or customers that you must help. Your dishes will still need to be washed, the clothes folded, and the toys put away. You will still have meetings and appointments and people waiting for you. You will still have to decide what to do next. You will still have to face what is up ahead . . .

But just for a second, I was wondering if I could share my heart with you. I'm not asking you to do anything. Nope. Nothing.

I'm not asking you to give any more of yourself when you already feel spread thin. I'm not adding one more thing to your list of things to do. Today, friend, I want to give you permission to just *be*.

Yes. That's it.

I know there are some days when you feel overlooked and underappreciated. You feel overwhelmed by the demands you face and the responsibilities you shoulder. You worry if you're messing everything up, or if it's too late, or if it's all worth it.

There are times when you feel unloved and unseen—and moments when you feel like you're failing at all of it.

Friend, sometimes we just need hope. We need someone to look into our hearts and speak hope into every shadowed corner. And I'm so grateful to be the one who gets to do just that. And the one who can pray for you.

So, Lord?

I ask that You would speak to the heart of my new friend. I ask that You would walk through these pages and speak through these words and gently remind her heart that You are with her. I pray that through these stories You would bring hope and healing as she begins to trace Your workings and Your presence in her own life. And I ask that You would weave new life into every area that feels threadbare and worn thin. Thank You for hearing me, Lord. Thank You for responding just because You love me and You love the one reading these words. In Jesus's name I pray, amen.

These words are my stories and my heart for you, friend. May you know the truth of God's presence in your life as you discover that His love, His plans, and His promises for you are forever unfolding. And together we will find strength as we remember that in Him alone there is hope.

With love,

Becky

Introduction



One More Thing to Hold

I have a white ceramic pitcher full of flowers that sits in my kitchen window. In the last year or so, I started collecting them (white pitchers, not windows). There is just something so clean and quaint and a little bit country about them. Also, I realized that most of the photos I pin to my “Dream Kitchen” board on Pinterest have a pitcher of flowers somewhere in the room.

If you’ve ever shopped for white pitchers, you know how hard they are to find. Well, they’re hard to find until you find one, and then suddenly you find five, and the fact that you couldn’t find any for so long makes you want to buy all five because Pinterest said you could put one in the window, and one on the kitchen table, and one on the bookshelf.

And so I bought all of them—hence the collection.

But my favorite is the small, simple pitcher that sits right in front of where I spend (what feels like) most of my day washing

out sippy cups and scrubbing out bottles. I use it as a vase to hold my favorite flowers . . . and before you start picturing a well-arranged bouquet sitting in a well-organized kitchen, you need to know that by “favorite flowers” I mean cut flowers that I buy at the grocery store for \$2.88.

Until last Mother’s Day . . .

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD

My sweet husband, Jared, is always early for everything—unless he is planning for my birthday or Mother’s Day or our anniversary. At this point, Jared’s favorite line is “I’m sorry that I didn’t get you a card. I just ran out of time.”

I never say anything about it. I wouldn’t say something to hurt him on purpose when I do know that he loves me and his time really is taken with all of his other obligations (like being a volunteer firefighter and our town mayor; serving at our church; or working his full-time, often-out-of-town job). If anyone could use the excuse that they just didn’t have any time, it would be my Jared.

Hypothetically, if I were to say something, I might say, “Really? You ran out of time? Because it’s not like Mother’s Day was a surprise. As a matter of fact, you said the same thing last year, and that means you had exactly 365 days to buy a card or candy or a balloon. Don’t tell me you ran out of time.” I may or

may not have thought of that comeback years ago. But I haven't said it because, really, I'm not that type of lady (unless I'm hungry or tired, in which case I cannot be held responsible for the things I say when I'm "hangry" or sleep deprived).

Anyway, two days before Mother's Day this past year, Jared arrived home early from work and brought with him a small plant covered in tiny pink flowers. "Here! These are for you! They are supposed to keep blooming!"

I wasn't expecting them. I wasn't really expecting anything at all. (*Hoping?* Yes. *Expecting?* No.)

As a mom of three little ones, ages five, four, and one, I am resigned to the fact that I will likely never get what I think I really want for Mother's Day. Don't get me wrong—cards and breakfast are great. Still, every year I fantasize that my husband is planning an elaborate celebration of my day-in, day-out dedication to our family and children. (A girl can dream, can't she?)

Each year, I imagine him arranging to gift me with a day off from all of my responsibilities. On this day off, everyone else would do all of the work that I usually do, then comment on how they didn't realize just how hard a mom's job really is. The day might include a trip to the salon or spa, after which I would return, feeling pampered and refreshed, to find a clean house with bathed children who have already been tucked into bed for the night. Glory.

I was mid-daydream, cucumbers over my eyes and tranquil

music playing softly in my ears . . . when my husband jolted me back to reality, holding out the flowers and spilling a little bit of potting soil onto the carpet.

“It’s not just an arrangement. It’s a plant! It keeps blooming!”

He was so proud of himself, and I really was grateful that he had thought of me. So I thanked him as Kolton, my five-year-old, shouted, “Happy Momma’s Day!” His little sister, Kandence, sang it out about a beat behind him. They ran and hugged me, squishing their baby brother, Jaxton, whom I was holding on my lap.

And so I held all of them—my sweet babies and my new plant that, while beautiful, felt like one more thing that I had to take care of. I sat there in the middle of my living room, with full hands and a full heart, so thankful for the gift of children who make me Momma, while silently fighting back tears of stress. Sometimes the weight of adding one more thing to what we are required to hold makes us feel like we’re going to drop everything.

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt as if you cannot find a steady balance between being a wife and a momma? Have you ever felt overwhelmed by not only your motherhood but also by the reality of being a momma, while also trying to do everything else at the same time? Friend,

One More Thing to Hold

you're not the only one. Sometimes, we don't even realize that we need hope until someone offers it. We don't even realize that we are desperate for someone to understand how we feel until we hear another woman say, "I have been there too."

I think that far too often we find hope in things that will fade away. We find hope in articles that tell us to get a better night's sleep or clean our kitchen before we go to bed or recite five proven prayers to find peace, balance, and a calm heart. But the truth is we need Jesus. We need an encounter with the only One who knows and understands and wants to meet us right where we are. And when we encounter that hope? When we reach out to the only One who can give us the authentic life-sustaining grace that we so desperately crave? We experience the difference between being buried in chaos and planted in His love.

HOPE UNFOLDING

I am not a gardener. In spite of that, my husband and I have begun a garden in front of our house multiple times. Obviously, one only gets to experience the joy of beginning a garden multiple times if something happens to the previous garden. I will let you infer what you would like, but let's just say we kill all the plants.

This is not on purpose. We aren't purposeful plant killers. I read the labels. I buy plants that are hardy for our planting zone. (You should know that I feel fancy even knowing what *planting zone* means.) But despite my best efforts, until recently most of our plants didn't make it through the harsh Oklahoma winter. Which makes me think of *Little House on the Prairie* . . . and covered wagons and salt-cured pork. In case you haven't been to Oklahoma in a while (or ever), I feel like I should mention that we have come a long way. But back to the plants.

I kill all of them. Every time.

So, when Jared handed me that sweet little plant with the tiny pink blooms on Mother's Day, I felt like I should apologize to it. It had surely lived a healthy and happy plant life before it arrived at my house. It wasn't the plant's fault that it had been gifted to me.

But instead of writing its eulogy, I decided to do my best to take care of it. I moved it from one window to the next, setting it in different sunny places around my house. Once I even took it out onto the back porch for some morning light. I watered it. I cared for it. But before long, despite all of my best efforts, the tiny pink flowers withered and fell off, one after the other, until there were no blooms left.

I wondered what I had done wrong. It felt like proof of my failure, and for some reason—probably because it was a

Mother's Day gift—I related the health of this small plant to my success as a momma.

The baby had skipped his morning nap, my older two kids were fighting, the house was in a general state of chaos, and I couldn't even keep this small plant alive for two weeks. I needed a win. That's when I decided to let my plant live the last of its days in my favorite pitcher in my window.

The pitcher had been empty for a while. Even though I did my best to always have flowers of some kind in it, it had sat empty in my window for over a month.

I pulled the makeshift vase off the window ledge and ran some hot water inside, swishing it around and then pouring the dirty water into the kitchen sink. I wiped down its warm ceramic sides and dried off the last of the droplets. I reached over and gently rocked the small plant from its container, being careful not to break the delicate stem as bits of dirt fell, leaving the roots exposed. I scooped up some of the soil left in the pot, using my hand as a shovel. I poured it into the pitcher and then carefully lowered the plant in on top of it, packing dirt around the base.

It's still green, so maybe it still has a shot, I thought. Maybe it's not hopeless after all.

Honestly, each morning, I was surprised when I would go into the kitchen to start breakfast and find that the plant was still alive. Life has a way of surprising us like that sometimes,

doesn't it? So as long as the plant wasn't giving up, I decided that I wasn't either. I watered it every few days and enjoyed having something in the pitcher again. And the plant kept living. One day after another, with just a little bit of water and a little bit of sunlight, the plant just kept living, and eventually tiny pink blooms covered it again.

I guess that is the difference between cut flowers and a flower that has been planted in good soil and prepared for growth. A bouquet in a vase might look pretty, but it doesn't have what it takes to keep growing. And the same is true for us.

Friend, I know how overwhelmed your heart sometimes feels, and I know how down-to-the-bone tired—yes, completely exhausted—you are most days. I know what it feels like to spend hour after hour holding or rocking or feeding a fussy baby, a sick baby, or a baby who just refuses to close his precious little eyes. I know how small hands that shake us in the night to tell us about a bad dream or cries that send us running into door frames and across LEGO minefields can make for a long day.

I know how restless nights can make today feel like an extension of yesterday. And yesterday an extension of the day before. And how all of your days seem to run together. I know what it feels like to be standing in a place where tomorrow looks like more of the same, with no end in sight.

I get it. Momma, I totally get it.

Maybe you woke up ready for today to be different. Happy

attitudes, extra patience, and NO YELLING! And maybe by 8:15 a.m. you realized that it was going to be another day full of cranky babies, demanding toddlers, and guilt from losing your temper when you could have just taken a deep breath and calmly repeated your request to your five-year-old . . . for the hundredth time.

Maybe breakfast, or lunch or dinner, is still out on the counter, and you can't stop to clean it up because you have to find another pair of Buzz Lightyear undies since all of those online articles on how to potty train your kid in thirty-six hours were a bunch of bunk.

Maybe you're out of diapers, and the milk has gone bad, and the bill you paid a week ago got lost in the mail. Maybe you're about to run to the grocery store with hungry kids, while wearing a sweatshirt over last night's pajamas.

Maybe you're on your third ear infection this month, or it feels like you have visited the doctor's office so often that you should have your own reserved parking spot. Maybe everything that could go wrong has gone wrong and nothing seems fixable; you don't know how you'll make it, but you keep going because there are no other options and if you come undone then everything and everyone else will come unraveled with you.

Sweet friend, I hear you. Sometimes I want to scream when I read words that tell me to cherish these moments. These

moments of pure exhaustion when I am hanging on by a thread. When I don't remember the last time I had a proper meal or felt like I wasn't in charge of *everything*. When my heart wasn't torn by the guilt of craving a moment for myself, while knowing that I should appreciate the gift of having a family to love.

Because we already know it's true. We know that one day we will look around and miss all of this madness. But today—in the middle of it—we don't need to add guilt to our exhaustion, and we certainly don't want to have to add “find joy” to our to-do list.

We just need hope (and maybe a long, uninterrupted nap).

We need to know that somewhere someone else feels the same way that we do. We need to believe that we aren't alone. And beyond having hope that tomorrow could be different, we need to know that there is purpose in where we are standing today.

Friend, there is only one way that we are going to have the strength to keep going. There is only one way that we are going to have all that it takes to love our families with the love that they deserve, the love we so desperately want to give them. We must become rooted in the Truth of who God is calling us to be by hearing and believing the Truth of who He says that we already are.

So, for the next few chapters, I want to water your heart

with the hope of God's love and Truth. I want to remind you that you're not alone. As I share stories from my own life, and point to the places where hope began to grow unexpectedly for me, I want you to recognize the areas where new life is possible for you. And as I share some of the things that God has spoken to my heart, I want you to begin to listen to what He is saying to yours. Friend, in the pages ahead, we will chat about the things that weigh heaviest on our mommy hearts. Some of those areas don't get spoken of often. Some of those places are shadowed and hidden. But as we shine light on those areas, we will begin to see the promise of the new growth. We will see that our stories are still being written.

If I could, I would ask you over to my house. While the kids ran and played, you and I would sit and chat. We would dialogue back and forth; we would dream and hope together. But because that's not possible (well, not today anyway), at the end of each chapter, we will have a chance to reflect together. There are a few questions that might put into words what your heart has been asking, and some space to journal your responses. My hope is that you would use this space to clear your heart of any heavy concerns and to give life to some of your forgotten dreams. And as we spill out our stories together, we will pray and ask the Lord to continue the good work that He has begun in both of us.¹ I am so grateful for the chance to spend a few minutes with you, and I am even more honored

Introduction

that you would give me the chance to remind you of God's goodness.

You and I are going to be okay, friend, because together we are going to plant ourselves in grace and let the Lord wash over us with His love as we experience the miracle of tiny pink flowers blossoming . . . and hope unfolding.



Diamonds in the Dirt

GOD HASN'T FORGOTTEN ABOUT YOU

Two years ago, and seven years into our marriage, I stood over our mudroom sink with my husband's wedding ring and a toothbrush in my hand. I began to scrub the Oklahoma red dirt from around the small diamonds. The loose sand and clay pooled in the sink, then slowly slipped down the drain. I tried to imagine the last of my expectations washing away as well.

I turned the ring over in my hand and remembered the day that the jewelry store lights first reflected off it. When we were choosing the wedding band, I had tried to imagine it on my husband's finger as he held the microphone at the front of the church. It was exactly what I imagined a pastor would wear. Not just a plain band, but not too much sparkle either. We weren't aiming for a flashy 1990s televangelist look; we were

just trying to communicate that the handsome young pastor was unmistakably married. The white gold band with three diagonal lines of diamonds announced it perfectly.

I scrubbed some more and held it up to see if I had removed all of the clay. The ring didn't sparkle like it used to. It was scuffed and dulled, and no matter how much I polished, I couldn't remove all of the life that had settled into the cracks.

Let's be honest. The blistering Oklahoma sun is hardly comparable to stage lights. The ditches where my husband, a welder, spends his days laying natural gas pipelines aren't exactly the same as church platforms. As I held that small circle in my hand, the perfect symbol of our marriage and life together, I couldn't help but think that we had chosen a ring for a different life. Because what I expected isn't anything at all like the way it turned out.

Deep down, I was afraid that all of the people who questioned our quick engagement and young vows were right. I was afraid that all of the people who said that we hadn't had a chance to grow up before we committed our lives to each other weren't wrong after all. I had done my best to ignore them when Jared and I were married when I was just nineteen. I had done my best to pull up those sprouting seeds of doubt that said we would never make it. But sometimes we push things down when we should be pulling them up, and we don't realize the difference until they begin to grow.

Has anyone ever doubted a major decision that you have made? Have you ever stood in the place where the opinions of others have made even your most confident choices seem questionable? Maybe it was something simple. Maybe you were trying to decide if you should continue to try to breastfeed or switch to formula. Or maybe it was something bigger. Perhaps you were deciding if you would stay at home or go back to work. I know it can be hard to move forward when we feel like others don't support us or our choices. How do we remain confident in our decisions when it seems as if we will be moving forward alone? The truth is, once that seed of doubt has been planted, it doesn't take much for it to begin to take root. That's exactly what I began to experience as my life began to unfold.

I had always wanted to be a momma. I wanted a house full of babies and a man who loved Jesus and his family. I wanted to be a wife. But as I stood in the middle of all of my dreams coming true, I couldn't help but feel like maybe I had missed something somewhere. There were still all of these other things that I desired—hopes, dreams, plans. But my to-do list on my calendar didn't line up with the passions in my heart. I was overwhelmed trying to balance life as wife and a mother. I was needed by everyone, and yet I felt unseen in the story of my own life.

What did I still want to do? Who did I want to be when I grew up? Was this really how it all turned out in the end? It was

like a steady beat on the door of my heart—a call to something bigger than myself—a reminder that there was a time when not only did I get to sleep, but I dreamt too.

I just had to decide that the passions and plans deep inside of me were still worth remembering. And friend, the things that are in your heart should not be forgotten either. Jesus places desires in our hearts for a reason. But to recognize this, and explain how He worked it all out in His timing, I have to go all the way back to the beginning. Back to the day that a cookie changed everything.

THE DAY THAT DETERMINED MY FUTURE

Some love stories start in a college classroom, or at a crowded holiday party, or on a blind date arranged by mutual friends. The story of Jared and me started with some new clothes and a cookie.

I had just finished my first two semesters of college in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and I was staying at my parents' house in Norman for the summer. I decided to fill my free time with an easy job at a nearby mall. (Okay, I'll be honest. I did it for the employee discount I would get on the clothes.)

I had worked retail in high school. Back then, there were many times when girls came in asking for a job and were hired on the spot. So I decided that I would try that approach. It

worked, and I was offered a job at one of my favorite shops. But as I left the store and headed toward the parking lot, a small voice in my heart said, "*Keep walking.*" It wasn't just some thought I had. It was a voice. It was clear, and it was one I had heard many times earlier in my life. So I listened. Besides, who was I to argue with a voice that tells me to spend a little more time at the mall?

Following my heart, I came around a corner just as a young woman placed a Now Hiring sign on the counter of a small clothing kiosk. It was too much of a coincidence not to approach her.

"You are hiring?" I asked, pointing to the sign.

The woman replied with a thick Russian accent. "Yesss. Vhhaaat is your experience?"

I instantly felt as though she would be hard to please, but I gave it my best shot. "Um. I worked in a clothing store during high school, and I am very reliable, and I'm very responsible." I ended with an exaggerated smile.

She glared at me, thought for a moment, and then became the second person to offer me a job in that hour. Also, she might not have actually been glaring. I never could tell if she was always slightly agitated, or if that was just her beautiful stern face. Either way, I was told to come back the next day for training. I agreed. And I quickly resigned from the other store.

It wasn't a fast-paced job. I sat on a stool in the middle of

the mall, waiting for people to walk by and buy black flowy gaucho pants and sequin-covered elastic belts that were shipped in from Los Angeles. And while we are discussing this, I feel like I should say, “Dear Lord, thank You that one day we all woke up and decided that neither of those clothing items was a good idea. Amen.” (If you happen to be reading this when flowy gaucho pants and sequined-covered belts are totally in style again, then good for you. Let the record show, at one point back in 2005, I was a trendsetter. You’re welcome, future gaucho wearer.)

About halfway through my first day on the job, I quickly realized that I was going to need a little help with my kiosk when it came to taking breaks. (It’s not like those freestanding shops have potties somewhere.) So I asked the guy working at the shoe store right next to the cart if he would watch my shop while I ran to the restroom. Of course, I should add here that I needed an excuse to talk to him, because, y’all, he was *handsome*. I tried to be cute while I asked him to watch my cart, but that’s hard to pull off when you have to pee.

“Hey,” I said, sounding over-the-top flirty.

“Hey,” he replied, overly chill and laid back.

“Do you think you could watch my cart while I . . . take a break for a second?” I asked, batting eyelashes but fooling no one.

“Sure.”

He was clearly interested in me. So, I bought him a cookie to say thank you. Six months later, he bought me a ring.

THAT TIME I WAS SO WRONG

I really had no intention of falling for Jared. I was home just for the summer, and my plan was to return to school in the fall and find a nice guy who would one day become a pastor. At the time, I fully believed that if you wanted to devote your entire life to changing the world with the love of God, and you also wanted to be married, then you should find a man with a similar calling. While this is obviously not always necessary, this is what eighteen-year-old me believed. I mean, some girls grow up dreaming of what they want to be, and I grew up dreaming of what God might use me to do to advance His kingdom. I had encountered God at a very young age, and I wanted to see other people's lives transformed by an encounter with Jesus as well. More than anything else, I wanted to be that person who led others to Him.

Making plans for the future, I decided that I wanted a husband who would be my partner in ministry as well as life. (Side note: I have learned since then that when it comes to future planning, it's always best to leave it up to the One who has already been there.)

Jared was on his own path. He was a country boy who was

working toward becoming a police officer. Clearly (well, at least it was clear to me), we could be friends but nothing more. I made this known to him from the beginning. I guess it might be a little awkward to admit, but I remember telling him, “Someday I am going to be a pastor’s wife.” He was not going to be a pastor, so I might as well have said, “Look. You are super handsome. As a matter of fact, when we talk, I’m usually distracted by your good looks, but this [I gesture toward him and back toward me] isn’t going anywhere.” It is funny how sometimes we nearly miss God’s perfect plan because we are so busy coming up with our own—even when we have the best intentions at heart.

Jared and I spent a lot of time together in those short summer months. It wasn’t anything serious, but there was something about Jared that seemed . . . significant. I couldn’t quite figure out what pulled my heart to his, but to speed this story up a bit, our friendship grew into love, and six months after that voice in the mall told me to keep walking, the same voice whispered, *“Say yes when he asks.”*

Naturally, this could only mean one thing. If I was going to marry a pastor someday, and Jared was the guy for me, then Jared wasn’t going to become a police officer. Obviously, God was going to do some redirecting in Jared’s life, and he would become a pastor at the end of the story. Right? I had it all figured out. We would dedicate our entire lives to sharing the gospel. We would be teachers of the Word, lovers of the

brokenhearted, and revivalists for the kingdom of God! At least, that was my plan. You can imagine my confusion when, three years into our marriage, Jared suggested that we move with our six-month-old son to his small hometown in the middle of NW Oklahoma to work for his family's natural gas pipeline construction business.

Surely, he couldn't be serious. Surely, one of us had misheard the Lord . . . and surely it wasn't me.

Have there been any plot twists in your story that you didn't see coming? A surprise phone call from your husband to announce a job transfer, or a positive pregnancy test that you just didn't expect? Have you found yourself working when you planned on staying home with your babies, or staying at home when you had a career path mapped out? What did you do? How did you respond? Probably better than I did when I realized that things weren't going to be much like I had imagined. It is hard to have grace for the way things are when our lives aren't much like what we had imagined they would be.

There's nothing wrong with saying, "I'm not sure what I was hoping for, but I am sure that this is not it." But what do we do then? How do we reconcile our expectations with our realities? What do we do when nothing in life feels much like what we thought it would? And how do we find hope when it feels like nothing could possibly ever change?

You know, I suppose the day before everything changes

feels like just another ordinary day. It is not until we look back that we realize something significant was about to happen, and we didn't even see it coming. That's where my story really begins. In the middle of my ordinary day, in the middle of NW Oklahoma.

BACK ROAD REVIVAL

Yes. It's true. We ended up in a very small town in NW Oklahoma where Jared works for his family's company. I like to joke that NW isn't just the abbreviation for *northwest*, but more accurately stands for "No Where." I have come to love this place and love the people here, but I have to be honest. The first time that Jared brought me to his parents' house, I was secretly concerned that he was taking me to the middle of nowhere to drop me off for good. I kept thinking, as he drove farther and farther away from civilization, *How well do I really know this guy? Will anyone ever find me out here? Are we the first people to ever drive down this back road?*

Seriously. If you want to find my house, drive until you say to yourself, *Where are we?* And then keep going fifteen more minutes. We're the second house on the left. Friend, I have wheat fields for neighbors, more unwelcome critters than I care to admit, and the nearest Walmart or Starbucks is forty minutes away. Yes, *forty*.

This was never supposed to be my story.

When we moved into my husband's old basement bedroom in his parents' house with our six-month-old baby—while we decided where we were going to live long-term—I remember thinking, *Well, if there was any hope left that my life would turn out even a little like I had imagined, it is gone.* Each step seemed to take me further away from everything I had planned, and if the demands of being a new mom and a young wife were not enough, I began to feel lost in my own life.

Remember, I was going to change the world with the love of God. I was going to reach the nations with the transforming Truth of Jesus Christ! How was I supposed to do that from my tiny town, while living in my in-laws' basement? How could I possibly make a difference as a stay-at-home momma consumed with the day-to-day tasks of taking care of my baby, my house (well, my corner of my in-laws' house), and my husband (who clearly was not interested in becoming a pastor)? And where on earth was God in all of this?

Friend, maybe there are moments when you have felt the same way. You had plans that have been set aside. You had dreams that now seem more like shadows. And like me, all of your sparkly expectations have turned out a little muddier than you imagined. But this moment, right where you are, is no surprise to God. He didn't wake up this morning and say, "Wow! How'd we end up here?" then shrug His shoulders and shuffle

off to get some coffee (even though there are days that feel as if that is His general attitude). He has been with you every step of the way. Even the ones that didn't make any sense. Sometimes, we just have to be willing to admit that even if it doesn't look anything like we thought it would, God knew exactly where we would end up all along . . . even if it seems like we have been forgotten in the middle of nowhere. And you and I are not the first to feel this way.

FROM THE BEGINNING

Eve was the first woman that God made. She and her husband, Adam, were placed in a garden, perfectly cared for by God, and were given one command: "Don't eat the fruit from this one particular tree." That seems simple enough. Just don't eat this fruit. But she eats the fruit, and disobeys God, and God says basically, "Okay, well, you disobeyed, and now you cannot stay in the garden with Me anymore." (But we don't realize why God did this until later in the story.)

See, God had a plan. Because He always has a plan. He wasn't surprised by Eve's choices. He wasn't surprised by Adam and Eve's relocation to a new neighborhood outside of the Garden of Eden. God knew that He would send His Son, Jesus, to die as the sacrificial Lamb to redeem humanity and draw them back to Himself. Scripture says that Jesus's sacrifice was prepared

long before Adam and Eve ever took those fateful bites. The book of Revelation confirms this.

But until then, God also knew that Adam and Eve couldn't stay in the garden. Because there was also this other tree in the garden called the tree of life, and as long as Adam and Eve continued to eat from it, they would continue to have eternal life. So, listen to this: God loved Adam and Eve so much that once they disobeyed Him and separated themselves from Him, He couldn't let them stay in the garden and eat from the tree of life because then they would live forever separated from Him. He loved them too much to allow them to live outside of His presence forever. So He made it so they couldn't get to the tree of life and He made sure that He would be able to save all of humanity through Jesus later on.

But I bet at that time Adam and Eve didn't understand that part of their story. From their perspective, there was no way to comprehend what God had in store. You know, sometimes we have to be willing to trust God to lead us down the roads that don't make any sense if we want to continue to walk in His perfect plan. We have to trust that He doesn't just have our best interests at heart but the interests of those that we love as well.

Whatever you are trusting Him with, whatever steps you are taking or see ahead that you need to take, I want you to look at them as the safest route to your future. Because even when we don't understand them, we can trust that God is ordering them

purposefully forward. And I have learned it is often just when we think we are truly lost that we realize even the back roads can take us exactly where we were supposed to be all along.

And that is exactly what I did. One step after the other, I followed the Lord as He led me where I least expected to go—right where I wanted to be all along. It just happened to take a little longer to recognize it once I arrived.

Let's Talk

Does it ever feel as if God has forgotten about you and your dreams? Do you ever wonder why God would place all of these dreams in your heart, only to forget you now? It can be easy to feel as though there is no way for things to change. It can be easy to believe that life will always be just like it is right now, but God isn't done writing your story. What if I reminded you that even the most unspectacular moments are all steps on the path down which God is calling your heart? What would it mean if you truly believed that you haven't missed God's plan? That He hasn't forgotten about you? That He is still working it all out for your good? Think back to what you dreamt of doing when you were younger. How would you live if you believed that anything was still possible?

God Hasn't Forgotten About You

Let's Pray

Lord, thank You for the dreams that You have placed in our hearts. Thank You for the desires that burn (even dimly) deep within us. Sometimes the obligations that we carry as wives and moms seem to suffocate the flame of hope within us. We feel overwhelmed by the demands of our days and the reality that there doesn't seem to be a break in sight. God, this doesn't leave much room for dreaming. This doesn't leave much space for considering what we would like to do for us when we are so consumed with taking care of everyone else. So, Lord, I ask that You would stir up our hearts for the things that You've called us to do. Fan the flame of hope as we search Your heart and find purpose in Your presence. Help us to cling to the truth that You have not forgotten about us, and we have not missed Your plans for us. In Jesus's name we pray, amen.

Let's Hope (Say This with Me!)

God isn't done with me yet! He has a plan for me. I will choose to trust Him.



WATERBROOK MULTNOMAH
PUBLISHING GROUP

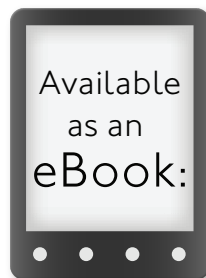
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

Want to keep reading? You've got options:

Purchase a copy direct from the publisher or from your favorite retailer:

BUY NOW

Download a copy for your eReader and keep reading right away:



amazonkindle

Google
books

iBooks

nook™
by Barnes & Noble

And More...