

Foreword by Lysa TerKeurst, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

A Confident Heart

How to Stop Doubting Yourself &
Live in the Security of God's Promises

RENEE SWOPE

Proverbs 31 Ministries Radio Show Co-Host

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Live in the Security of God's Promises

Renee Swope


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What Readers Are Saying

“*A Confident Heart* showed me how much self-doubt affects every area of my life. This book encouraged me, equipped me, and changed me. Honestly, I think everyone should read it!”—Jill B., Iowa

“Rich with the truth of God’s love, compassion, patience, and never-ending supply of power, this book moved me from looking at my past with sorrow to living my future rooted and grounded in the confidence of Christ.” —Danielle J., North Carolina

“Through *A Confident Heart* Renee reminded me that I may fail God, but He will never fail me. I love the Scriptures woven into prayers at the end of each chapter. They hold such a wealth of truth! I will continue to use them as daily prayers.”—Joy B., Ontario

“*A Confident Heart* gave me courage and clarification to believe in my calling. I now see beauty in my brokenness—something I saw only in everyone else. God used this message to help me to see myself as beautiful in a way I never had before.”—Cris N., California

“I practically highlighted whole chapters. Renee helped me see how ‘the God of all hope is calling me out of the shadow of my doubts so I can live with a confident heart!’”—Melinda T., Oregon

“*A Confident Heart* moved me from believing what God says about me to receiving it and living in it. One thing Renee taught me is how to ‘fail forward’ by learning from my mistakes and leaving them behind for good—along with my guilt, shame, and worry!”—Lisa S., Texas

“Renee helped me see that ‘salvation is a one-time decision, but finding satisfaction in Christ and living in the security of His promises is a daily process.’ I will read *A Confident Heart* over and over to keep it fresh in my heart and mind.”—Margaret S., North Carolina

“Renee showed me how ‘I can find lasting satisfaction when I continually drink from the source of God’s unconditional love.’ I’m giving a copy to my daughters and their friends. I wish I’d read this when I was in my twenties. How differently my life may have turned out.”—Lelia C., Nebraska

“Reading *A Confident Heart* helped me realize that I’m not alone in my insecurities. I am normal, loved, accepted, and approved by mighty God.”—Tammy N., Kentucky

“I received *A Confident Heart* the week I found out my mom was in her final days on earth. I ended up reading chapters out loud to her. The message was so powerful. The Scriptures were right there. I would say, ‘Mom, listen to this!’ Renee’s words lifted my heart and carried me through.”—Kirsten S., Pennsylvania

“In all of my fifty-five years, I’ve never read a book that spoke to me, moved me, and set me free from so many issues. I couldn’t put it down!”—Debbie L., North Carolina

Thank you for believing in me and this message, and for giving me time to write it. When my confidence wavered and my heart grew weary, God provided His strength *for me* and His confidence *me* through you.

But blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. (Jer. 17:7 NLT)

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Foreword

As a little girl, I longed for a daddy to pick me up, swing me around, and tell me that I was special. That I was beautiful. That I was treasured. And most of all, that I was loved. But my daddy never swung me around with great delight, and he never said the words my heart desperately longed to hear. This rejection became an adult emptiness and brokenness that made me doubt I was lovable.

Insecurities cut deep. Shame ran rampant. Desperation for acceptance drove me to seek out all kinds of misguided remedies.

My primary remedy was to find someone or something that would make me feel secure and significant. It was as if I carried around a little heart-shaped cup and held it out to whatever or whomever I perceived might fill it.

I presented the cup to my education: “Will you fill me?”

I offered it to my husband: “Will you fill me?”

I held it out to my child: “Will you fill me?”

I extended it to my material possessions: “Will you fill me?”

I presented it to each of my jobs: “Will you fill me?”

Within this question were many more entanglements: “Will you right all my wrongs?” “Will you fill up my insecurities?” The more I offered my emptiness, hoping something could fill it, the more inadequate I felt.

Why do we look to things of this world to give us security, self confidence, and fulfillment?

I think it’s because the message that worldly things can fulfill us is all around us. It’s on TV, it’s the focus of countless songs, and it dominates advertisements. We can’t even stand in the grocery store checkout lane without being bombarded by empty promises for a more fulfilling life. A better husband. A better body. A better career. A more beautifully decorated house. The magazines seem so slick, their promises so enticing. They sneak into our thought processes and make us think, *If only I had _____, I’d be so secure and fulfilled.*

But the reality is, every single thing the world offers is temporary. No person, possession, profession, or position can ever fill the cup of a wounded, insecure heart—not my heart, not your heart. It’s an emptiness only God can fill. Only God can give true confidence.

And how does God give us the gift of His security, fulfillment and confidence? He sends His words like love letters from Heaven to fall fresh on our parched and tired souls.

His truth waters us, sustains us, breathes new life into us and remakes us into the women He always intended us to be.

That’s why I’m so excited about Renee’s book. She is the friend you will find at the heart of this message. She’s walked this journey and gives us the gift of truths she’s discovered that will sweep away self-doubt and usher in the godly confidence we’ve been longing for our whole lives. Read this book and get ready to live with a confident heart.

Lysa TerKeurst, president, Proverbs 31 Ministries
New York Times bestselling author, *Made to Crave*

Acknowledgments

I've never had the opportunity to thank the people who have helped shape my life and my confidence—people who believed in me long before I believed in myself. I am so grateful to get to do that here. Some I've known all my life, others for several years, and still some I haven't even met in person. I'll do my best to say a lot in a little space, so this doesn't become the longest chapter of the book. And if my forty-something-year-old foggy brain forgets someone, please know I love you and thank God for you!

First to my husband and hero, JJ, you are an amazing man, husband, father, and friend. I don't know how I got chosen to be yours, but I'm so glad I did! Without your words of affirmation, your confidence in God's calling on my life, and your servant's heart, I'm not sure I'd have had the courage and perseverance to do this. Thank you for sacrificing so much because you love me, but more so because you love Jesus and desire that He be made famous through the message He's entrusted to us. I respect and love you more than words can say.

Joshua, your passion for reading and your gift of writing inspire me. But your thoughtfulness, perseverance, and wisdom blow me away and make me proud to be your mom. Thank you for your constant sacrifice and support during our year of "impossible." I pray your courage and strength will always be found in Christ, and that this message will become a legacy we live and leave together. I'll never forget the times you told me you'd do whatever I needed so that I could finish my book. I did it! Now it's your turn.

Andrew, God knew I needed more laughter and joy, so he gave me you! Your hugs, smile, encouragement, and the conversations you create to keep our family connected are such a gift! I love how you see God in everyday life and that you still let your mom in on the amazing journey of discovering who God created you to be. I value and respect who you are, and who you're becoming as you dig into God's Word and claim His promises for your life. May He alone be your confidence.

Aster, my Ethiopian princess. Never did I think I'd adopt a baby and write a book in the same year. Your momma is crazy, but not that crazy. Yet God's crazy, amazing love brought us together for such a time as this. I treasure your sweet hugs, contagious joy, and oh-so-kissable cheeks. From the first day I held you in my arms, Jesus has changed my life with your love. I cannot imagine a day without you! Sweetheart, you are already a beautiful display of His splendor, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. May your security and worth always be found in Him!

Mom, when I was sixteen you told me God must have a plan for my life. It was the night He spared my life from being lost in that horrible car accident. Your words painted a picture on the canvas of my heart that sent me searching for His purpose. I think this book might be part of it! Thank you for believing in me and loving me through it all. I'm grateful for the "kingdom" Jesus has given us to enjoy now in this new season of our lives.

Dad, Mark, Scott, Brad, Chris, Beth, Tamika, and Robin, thank you for your love, encouragement, and support!

Melanie and Leah, I couldn't have written or lived this message without you both by my side! Thanks for listening to me, laughing at me, carrying the weight of the world with me, and telling me I was "normal" even when it wasn't true (smiles). Your constant prayers and calming presence are God's gifts to me!

MaryAnn, who would I be without your prayers and friendship? Your unending gifts of encouragement, spiritual wisdom, and unconditional love have shaped my life. Your fingerprints are all over my heart and my story.

Lysa and Holly, thanks for your steadfast love, confidence, patience, and grace in the midst of the hardest holy thing I've ever done. Your lives and your love inspire me to become immeasurably more than I can think of or imagine.

LeAnn, you always know just what to say when I need you to say it. Thank you for making sure I don't take myself too seriously, but more than anything for loving me like Jesus does! I see Him in you every day.

To each of my Proverbs 31 Ministries sisters, you are my treasured friends and forever family! When I need to see or feel God's love, I can come to the office or pick up the phone, and it is well with my soul. I am honored to serve Jesus with you, and I wouldn't want to do life or ministry without you!

Bev, thank you for your smile that affirms me, your tears that tell me God is speaking through something I said, and the joyful enthusiasm you show every time you hear me teach. Boy, did He fill in my gaps with your help. I love and treasure you!

Alli, what would I have done without my leopard-print key to your townhouse that became my home away from home? Thanks for sharing your Oreos, Triscuits, and toilet paper—and anything else I needed. I love you and miss you so much!

My thanks to my faithful friends and extended family who carried my heart and my hopes in your prayers: Jen, Angela, Melissa N., Margaret, Angel, Karen, Vicki and Derwin, Fern and Jay, Teresa, Missy, Renee, Becky, Charlena, Debbie, Kim N., Vern, Cris, Tori, Nancy and Terry, Sara, Alex, Jason and Sharon, Rusty and Erin, Bev and Jim, Jennifer and Phil, Erika, Heather and Mark, and my whole Transformation Church family.

Esther and AJ, you are the answer to my impossible prayer! Thank you for your expertise, friendship, vision, and passion for my ministry and the message God had written on my heart. I'm so grateful for both of you!

Andrea Doering, my amazing executive editor and friend, you are one of a kind! My heart felt at home with you the first time we met. Thank you for believing in my dreams and carrying my message with such grace and eagerness.

To my wonderful publishing team at Revell, Janelle, Twila, Lindsey, Deonne, Michele, Rod, Rob, and the rest of the Baker-Revell family for all you have done and will do to bring this message to the hearts of those who long to live with confidence. Thank you for seeking Christ and His glory in all you do!

To my *Confident Heart* prayer team, a very special thank you, as well as my faithful blog and Facebook friends, amazing women's event leaders, and their ministry teams who so faithfully prayed and encouraged me through this journey!

Most of all, my sweet Jesus, thank You for not letting me throw away my confidence anymore. You encouraged me to persevere so that when I had done Your will, I would receive what You had promised! Because of Your life in me and my dependence on You, I found the confidence to believe and live in the assurance of Your love and the security of Your promises. You are my confidence!

Hebrews 10:35–3



Discovering the Shadow of My Doubts



So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

Hebrews 10:35–36

I stood in front of my bathroom mirror, squinting from the bright lights above while also trying to open my eyelids so I could brush mascara on my lashes. My mouth opened too, almost instinctively. I couldn't help but wonder why opening my mouth also opened my eyes. It didn't make sense and neither did the way I was feeling.

My heart was wrestling with self-doubt regarding an event I would be speaking at the next day. I had felt honored, confident, and excited when the leader called months before to invite me to speak at the women's event. Now I questioned whether I should have accepted the invitation in the first place. I couldn't help but wonder, *What's wrong with me?*

I needed to get ready, finish packing my suitcase, and drive to the airport. Instead, I wanted to stay home and do something predictable like fold laundry, order pizza, and watch a movie with my kids. Something less risky than standing in front of five hundred women to give a message that I hoped would challenge and encourage their hearts, bring them laughter, and leave them longing for more of God.

Questions replayed over and over in my head: *What if I completely forget what I am going to say? What if my points aren't that powerful? What if the women don't connect with my stories or laugh at my humor? What if . . . ?*

As I continued to put on my makeup, I asked God—once again—to please take away my uncertainty. I hated feeling this way. Canceling the event wasn't an option. Maybe I could call in sick. No, that wouldn't be good.

This was not the first time I'd struggled with self-doubt. In fact, doubt was something I had dealt with more times than I wanted to recount. As a child I doubted I was worth keeping. My insecurity even kept me from riding the carousel at an amusement park, because I doubted my dad would wait for me. I thought he might leave me forever once I was out of sight.

Doubt also robbed me of the joy of waterskiing as a young girl. I refused to try it because I wasn't sure my family would come back to get me once I let go of the rope. I questioned whether I was good enough in college, so I avoided some great opportunities because they brought the risk of rejection. Even as a young bride, I doubted my husband's faithfulness. Our newlywed memories include a lot of arguments about trust.

Now here I was years later, a grown woman in ministry, doubting myself again. It was getting old. I wondered if perhaps my self-doubt was a sign I was in the wrong calling. I mean, if God calls you to do something, shouldn't you feel confident about it? Shouldn't you want to do it? Shouldn't self-

assurance be part of God's equipping?

Maybe you know exactly what I'm talking about. Perhaps you have prayed since you were a little girl to be a mother, and here you are with kids, doubting you have what it takes to be a good mom. Or maybe you've sensed God calling you to serve Him in a way that requires steps of faith, but insecurity has convinced you that you're not smart enough or gifted enough. Perhaps you have wanted to change jobs for a while and now you have the opportunity to do just that, but you don't want to go. The unknown is too scary. Although you've been miserable, at least the misery is familiar where you are now.

I desperately wanted to move out of the shadow of my doubts, but all I could do was go through the motions and pray that God would zap me with confidence. I kept hoping it would happen right there in my bathroom, but it didn't. Doubt and questions continued to criticize me.

Once I finished brushing on my mascara, I turned around to put my makeup bag in my suitcase, which was on the floor behind me. That's when I noticed a huge nine-foot shadow on the wall. I was surprised by how much bigger my shadow was than my five-foot-two-inch frame.

It was distorting my image on the wall by making my body look bigger than it really was. All of a sudden, it dawned on me. My uncertainty had created a huge shadow of doubt. Just like my shadow on the wall was distorting my shape, my doubt was distorting my thoughts and overpowering my emotions with confusion and questions. The shadow of doubt had become bigger than what I doubted—myself.

I just stood there looking at the humongous shadow. Then I bent down to put my makeup bag in my suitcase and sensed God whispering to my heart: *You can only see the shadow because you have turned away from the light. Turn back toward the light.*

As I stood up and turned back toward the light above the mirror, I realized I was no longer standing in the shadow. And that was the day I discovered the shadow of my doubts.

Listening to Doubt's Whispers

In the shadow of doubt, insecurity paralyzes us with statements like:

"I can't do this."

"Things will never change."

"My life isn't going to get better."

"I'll never have the confidence I need."

Those are some depressing thoughts, aren't they? But oh how quickly they weasel their way into our minds and disguise their voices to sound like ours. Sometimes we agree with them and they become our own.

These are the voices of insecurity that cast shadows of doubt over our perspective and keep us from becoming the women we want to be—the women God created us to be. Self-doubt blocks the promise of God's power and truth to change us from the inside out so that we can live with a confident heart.

Have you ever agreed with the whispers of doubt and found yourself living with a sense of discouragement and defeat? Have you felt paralyzed by insecurity, and let it stop you from living confidently? If so, you are not alone.

Maybe, like me, you have wondered why you struggle with self-doubt. Or maybe you've asked God to take away your insecurities and give you a more confident personality, yet you are still waiting for that to happen. Perhaps you are good at hiding your doubts and no one but you knows the paralyzing

power they have on your life.

As you read the title of this book, did any hint of doubt creep in to tell you it's not possible to have a confident heart? It wouldn't surprise me. Doubt keeps us from believing things can get better. Doubt convinces us that it's not worth the effort. Doubt shouts from the sidelines:

“It's too hard.”

“You might as well quit.”

“Go ahead and give up. Just close the book now and walk away.”

It's Not Supposed to Be This Way

Don't listen to those thoughts, my friend. God doesn't want us stuck in a cycle of defeat or living in the shadows of doubt. He reminds us in Isaiah 49:23, “Then you will know that I am the LORD. Those who hope in me will not be disappointed.” Yet, doubt and hope cannot live in our hearts at the same time. As God's girls, we need to know and believe that change is possible. We need to hope that life can be different. Otherwise, doubt will win every time and our hearts will be eroded by attitudes and emotions of defeat—but it is not supposed to be this way.

God declares with confidence that things can change—“See, I am doing a new thing!” “I am working all things together for good, because you love me and are called according to my purpose.” “All things are possible to [her] who believes” (Isa. 43:19; Rom. 8:28; Mark 9:23 NASB).

Over the past few years, I've found lasting confidence by living daily in the security of God's promises. He's led me beyond believing *in Him* to really *believing Him* by relying on the power of His words and living like they are true no matter what my feelings tell me. Some days I do better than others, and you will too. But I've found that when I choose to dwell in the assurance of Whose I am and who I am in Him, I have a confident heart.

The God of all hope is calling you out of the shadow of your doubts so you can live with a confident heart! Are you ready to let His Word change the way you think, which will determine the way you feel and eventually transform the way you live (Rom. 12:2)? This will be a process that happens if you are willing to have honest, soul-searching conversations with God, yourself, and a few people you trust—conversations about where you are, how you got here, and where you really long to be.

If you are looking for a friend you can trust with the things of your heart, this book is a great place to start. I promise to create honest conversations about our doubts that will challenge us to live beyond them. We'll look back so we can move forward, and talk about how we got to this place of being so hard on ourselves.

We'll do the most important thing first: spend time digging deep into the heart and character of God so we can learn to depend on His heart toward us. The next three chapters will be foundational as we examine and grow in our understanding of who God is and who we are to Him. We will take the first steps out of the shadows of doubt as we choose to embrace the reality of His measureless grace, unconditional love, and redeeming hope.

Next, we'll identify the triggers of our self-doubt and the destructive effects they have on our lives and relationships. We'll learn how to live beyond the shadows of doubt by holding each of our insecurities up to the light of God's Word. We'll talk about the struggles, uncertainties, and fears we all face and how we can learn to actively trust God's heart as we process our never-ending thoughts, our always-changing emotions, and our oh-so-busy and often confusing lives through the transforming truth of God's Word. We will find our heart's confidence in Christ as we learn how to rely on the

power of His promises in our everyday lives.

Before we get started, there are a few things I want to make sure you don't miss. At the end of each chapter I have included something really important: a prayer that weaves together Scriptures we've talked about in the chapter and others I want us to engrave on our hearts. Praying God's Word has been one of the most life-changing ways I've learned to live in the security of His promises.

One way God tells us that confidence will come is when we ask Him for what is already part of His will. "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will He hears us" (1 John 5:14 NASB). So there you go: we can be confident we are praying God's will when we pray God's Word!

But that's not all. Romans 10:17 tells us that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (NASB), so let's pray these promises out loud again and again. That might seem weird but trust me, it works. When we pray God's words out loud, and hear them, the Holy Spirit engraves them on our hearts and writes them in our thoughts. We internalize God's truth as our faith grows and we are transformed from the inside out!

I also hope you will take time to answer the reflection and discussion questions after the prayer in each chapter. These will be an essential part of processing, internalizing, and applying God's promises to your life. Be sure to get a journal or notebook to write out the promise prayers and your answers to the questions so you can look back and see what God has done.

Reading this with a small group of friends would be ideal, but if you are going through it on your own, that's great too. I've created a section of my interactive website where I would love for you to be part of the conversation with me and other women who are seeking to live with confident hearts. I'd love to hear your thoughts and your story at www.ReneeSwope.com as we take this journey together.

Are you ready to take God's hand and trust His heart? If so, let's get started together in prayer.

Praying God's Promises

Lord, I pray that You would give me a confident heart in Christ. Take me beyond believing in You to truly believing You. Help me rely on the power of Your promises and live like they are true. You say blessed is the one who trusts in You and whose hope and confidence are found in You. Those who hope in You will not be disappointed, because You work all things together for good for those who love You and are called according to Your purpose.

When self-doubt tells me I can't overcome my insecurities, I will believe Your promise that all things are possible to whoever believes. I will not throw away my confidence, because You say it will be richly rewarded. I will persevere so that when I have done the will of God, I will receive what You have promised. My confidence is in Christ and I am no longer one who shrinks back and is destroyed, but one who believes and is saved! In Jesus' name, Amen.

See Jeremiah 17:7; Isaiah 49:23; Romans 8:28; Mark 9:23; Hebrews 10:35-36, 39.

Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. What is your earliest memory of doubting yourself or feeling insecure?
2. Has insecurity ever kept you from doing something?
3. Describe how it makes you feel when doubt whispers:
 - “I can’t do this.”
 - “Things will never change.”
 - “My life isn’t going to get better.”
 - “It’s too hard.”
 - “I might as well quit.”
4. Describe what happens in your heart when you read God’s words:
 - “Those who hope in me will not be disappointed” (Isa. 49:23).
 - “See, I am doing a new thing!” (Isa. 43:19).
 - “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).
 - “All things are possible to [her] who believes” (Mark 9:23 NASB).
5. What do you think hinders you most from living with God-confidence on a consistent basis? Is there a promise listed above that speaks to your greatest need right now?
6. How would you describe a woman with a confident heart?
7. Read Jeremiah 17:7. What does this verse promise and encourage you to do? Think of one situation where you could live in the power of this promise and describe what that would look like this week.

Because God's Love Is Perfect, I Don't Have to Be

It is a rare soul indeed who has been sought after for who she is—not because of what she can do, or what others can gain from her, but simply for herself . . . so what are we to conclude? Often we conclude that there is nothing in our hearts worth knowing. Whoever and whatever this mystery called *I* must be, it cannot be much.

John Eldredge and Brent Curtis^[1]

As I pulled into my driveway, I noticed an envelope taped to our front door. Immediately I tried to remember what I had done to deserve a thank-you note, but couldn't think of anything. I was so excited I didn't even open our garage door. Instead I parked in the driveway, hopped out of my car, and walked to the porch to get my note.

Much to my dismay, I discovered it was not a thank-you note. Instead, it was a notice. Someone on the neighborhood architectural committee had stopped by to inform us that our windowsills and front porch columns needed to be repaired and painted within thirty days, or we'd be fined. I was humiliated!

Did our house look bad enough to warrant an official notice? Had they taken the time to peek through the windows and see our new floors and kitchen renovations? I defended myself to the “neighborhood police,” who weren't even there to listen. I imagined them sitting around a table, talking about us in a homeowners' meeting while writing other citations for excessive yard debris and inappropriate paint colors.

My humiliation turned to frustration when my husband got home a few minutes later. He didn't know what to think as I wagged the envelope in my hand and told him, “There are four hundred homes in our neighborhood, and plenty of them are in much worse condition. How could they even see our windowsills and front porch? There is at least forty feet between our house and the curb.”

We had huge Bradford pear trees in our yard that blocked the view from the street so I knew someone must have come onto our property. To prove my point, I marched to the street and announced that I could barely see the windows or columns. “Our house looks fine,” I insisted.

It really did—from a distance. But as I walked back up to the porch and looked more closely, I had to admit that the winter winds and summer heat had worn the paint thin. It was peeling in a few places and the wood on our thirty-foot columns needed some repair. Since we had spent months (and most of our money) replacing countertops, floors, and carpets inside, we started making plans to complete the outside work ourselves. What we thought would take a few hours turned into several days. We spent weekends on ladders scraping, sanding, priming, and painting.

From a Distance

The more we sanded and scraped, the more the paint peeled. As I painted, I thought about how our

house really did look fine from a distance. Then I thought about how much I can be just like my house. From a distance, I look like I'm doing just fine.

It can be hard to let people know how we're really doing. We don't want to be high maintenance, right? We surely don't want people to see the peeling paint of our imperfections or the rotting attitudes in the wood boards of our minds. It's embarrassing for people to see our flaws and failures, so we work hard to look like we're doing fine from a distance.

Sometimes I think we tell people we're fine even when we're not, because we want to be fine. Or we hope that by saying we are fine, eventually we will be. Other times we act like we're fine because others expect us to be. Of course, there are days when hormones trump all good manners and reason. Days when anyone within ten feet knows you are not fine. Although we tell people we're fine, what we really mean is that we are **Frazzled, Irritated, Neurotic, and Exhausted!**

Being honest about who we are and how we are doing is especially risky when it comes to our insecurities. We fear that if people know we doubt ourselves, they'll start doubting us too. We walk into work on Monday morning with a smile, hoping no one will ask about our weekend. The sting of rejection is still raw after not being invited to a coworker's barbecue when everyone else was. Or we pull up in the carpool line, and someone asks about Christmas. "It was fine," we say, holding back the tears that follow a holiday filled with pain, strife, loneliness, and disappointment.

Sunday morning is the worst. How many of us rush out the door, fuss about what our kids are wearing and how they are acting, drive to church arguing with our husband, and then tell ourselves we're the worst mom and wife on the planet? We're convinced if anyone found out who we really are they wouldn't let us into church. Then we walk into the service—smiling. Someone asks how we're doing and we lie through our teeth: "I'm fine! We're doing great!"

Pretending

Pretending leads to hiding and isolation. What we need is someone who will pursue us and accept us even though we're flawed. Yet most of us doubt anyone would ever stick with us if we let them get too close. So we put up walls and hide our struggles, even from God, hoping we'll convince Him and everyone else that we're fine.

Eventually, though, we find ourselves in the shadows of doubt, convinced that we aren't worth knowing or pursuing. Slowly we begin to believe we have to be perfect to be loved and accepted. We know we never will be—but we'll die trying, won't we?

For much of my life, I put expectations of perfection on myself because I thought if I let others see my weaknesses and insecurities they would think less of me—and eventually leave me. My parents divorced when I was two, and my dad remarried. Although we spent time together and he would often give me things, it was hard for him to give much of himself.

Yet I longed for my father's love and approval. I thought if I could only make good grades, be prettier or smarter, accomplish things, or get the kind of degree he wanted me to get, then my daddy would value me. As an adult, I have come to realize that I believed I wasn't worth staying for, and if I had only done something differently my father would not have left us.

"You're not worth staying for" was a lie, but it became the truth through which I filtered my worth in all of my relationships. I tried to earn my worth through a performance-based value system, convinced that if I did the right things, said the right things, wore the right things, and looked the right way, then I'd be worth staying for.

My life was far from perfect, but I didn't want anyone to know. On the outside everything looked

“fine,” yet on the inside I was haunted by thoughts of never being good enough. I felt like I could never do enough to measure up.

Oh how I longed for someone to see past the exterior façade and look into the secret places of my heart. I wanted to be known and loved for who I was. Yet if I let my guard down, I was afraid someone would say I was too sensitive or too serious. It had happened before. So I pretended everything was fine. With each attempt to keep others impressed and distant, I stepped further into the shadows of doubt. Even though I was surrounded by people, my insecurities convinced me I was all alone.

By the time I was in college, I couldn't pretend anymore. I ran out of paint. The columns of my life started to crumble. The sills around the windows of my heart began to rot.

Although I had been going to church off and on for years, I had never really understood the messages I heard. I went to church because my friends were going. I went because my boyfriend invited me, which meant I'd get to spend more time with him on Sunday. Finally, in my early twenties, I started going for me. I started listening and truly hearing what was being said.

One day I realized I couldn't keep pretending. I was not fine, and I couldn't fake it anymore.

Up Close and Personal

Slowly but surely, the walls around my heart started to come down. Over time God revealed His heart to me through sermons at a nearby church and books I read, but more than anything He spoke to me through the Bible. Through His written Word on the page and His living Word in the person of Christ. I came to know an up close and personal Savior who pursues imperfect women like me. I read stories that echoed the struggles and desires of my heart. Tucked within those stories I discovered God's promises and how He responds to the longings and hurts of His children. I read words that gave me hope and assured me that I was not alone.

One of my favorite pictures of God's pursuit of us is in the Gospel of John, chapter 4. The story's main character is referred to as the Samaritan woman, but I like to call her Sam. It makes her feel more like the real woman she was, with a heart that had been broken just like so many of ours. Sam had searched for years to find acceptance, love, and approval in the heart of a man.

She'd been married five times. In her culture women could not divorce their husbands, so she had been discarded by five men and was now living with a man who didn't think she was worth committing to. We meet her one day while she is running errands and running away from those who knew all about her flaws and failed marriages. Feeling imperfect and ashamed, she walked to the well alone that day.

Typically, women came to the well in the morning or early evening. They traveled together in the cool of the day, avoiding the scorching heat of the sun since they would be carrying heavy jars filled with water back to their homes. But not Sam; she walked there all by herself.

Many theologians believe that instead of avoiding the scorching heat of the sun, she went to the well at noon to avoid the scorching pain of others' rejection and judgment. The weight of the water-filled jar in the heat must have been almost unbearable, but the weight of her neighbors' words, reminding her of her failures and imperfections, was more than she could take.

I imagine at one time Sam had walked to the well with the other women from her small town. They would talk about their day, their husbands, and their kids—but then they started talking about her. Whispers and condescending glances must have come after her first divorce, judgment and shame after her second. At what point had Sam distanced herself? Had she made excuses to stay back while the other women went ahead, insisting she was “fine,” but would go later? Let's pick up her story

where she meets Jesus:

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” . . .

The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” (John 4:7–10)

When Sam saw Jesus sitting at the well that day, she didn’t know who He was. She could tell by the way He was dressed that He was Jewish and wondered why He was talking to her, a Samaritan. Men didn’t talk to women in public places. Sam must have avoided eye contact at first. Did she wonder if He wanted something, like all the other men in her life? He did—but it wasn’t what she must have expected.

When He spoke, she heard gentleness in His voice. There was kindness and humility in His simple request for a drink. When she looked into His eyes she saw acceptance, not judgment; love, not hate. She felt valuable in His presence, as though she had something to offer. There was something different about Him.

He Is There

Jesus could have chosen to be anywhere else that day, but instead He was there pursuing Sam. John tells us in verse 4 that Jesus “*had* to go through Samaria.” Jews considered Samaritans to be the scum of the earth. Usually if they were near Samaria they would travel around it—but not Jesus. He *had* to go through Samaria, because He knew Sam would be there.

Knowing she was running from the very thing that reminded her of her imperfections, Jesus timed so that she would run into Him and find perfect love. He initiated conversation and asked her for the one thing she had to offer: water. It wasn’t much, but it was a starting point. Sam could have easily filled her jar and headed back home, returning to her busy day. But she stopped and listened.

Jesus met Sam in one of the loneliest parts of her day. In the same way, He is there waiting for us in the midst of our imperfect lives, when our pain and failures confirm our self-doubts. He is there waiting for us when we’re going through the motions, aware of what needs to be done but unaware of how we’re going to do it. He is there on those mornings when we can’t stop criticizing ourselves for blowing it the day before; when we go to work and wonder why we’re even there.

During endless days filled with changing diapers and doing laundry, wondering if we’ll ever find meaning in the monotony of motherhood, He is there. When we come home to an empty house and wonder why we don’t have a family, or come home to a teenager who belittles us and a husband who ignores us, Jesus is there.

If you’ve ever doubted God’s personal pursuit of you, let this truth sink in, my friend: wherever you are, He wants to meet you there. He is waiting for you to stop, come up close, and turn your heart to listen to His. You don’t have to pretend things are fine when they aren’t. He knows what is going on in your thoughts. Nothing could keep Him from wanting to be with you.

He invites you to come to Him to receive the perfect love He offers—love that casts out fear, love that is patient and kind, love that keeps no record of wrongs. That is what He offered Sam, and it’s what He offers you and me.

Will This Make My Life Easier?

Jesus told Sam if she knew who she was talking to, she wouldn't even bother with the water in the well. Instead, she would ask Him for life-giving water:

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." (John 4:11–15)

Sam didn't understand the fullness of His promise, so she focused on the first part of Jesus' sentence, which equated in her mind to "this could make my life easier." Never thirsting again meant she wouldn't have to come back to the well every day. Her errands would be shorter and her to-do list cut in half!

Do you ever read God's promises and fall into the pattern of thinking, "Oh, it would make my life so much easier if God would just do this"? I do. It's easy to approach God like a magic genie, hoping He'll grant our wishes. Some days I'll tell God what I need to get done and minimize my prayers to asking Him to bless my efforts.

Now I'm not implying that God isn't concerned with our daily needs; He cares about every detail in our lives. But if we only live on the surface with God, we'll never experience the intimacy we long for or the acceptance and security He offers.

Instead of just making our lives easier, God wants us to come up close and experience Him and all that He has for us. He knows that our problems won't be solved and our confidence won't be found through simply getting more stuff done.

Instead, He invites us to slow down and talk to Him about our day and the desires of our hearts, asking Him to show us the reasons for our doubts and insecurities. He wants us to go below the surface by asking Him to show us *why* we want what we want. Then we can ask Him if what we want is really what we need.

Below the Surface

Sam wanted Jesus to change the course of her day, but she needed Him to change the course of her life. Much like the path she wore back and forth to this well each day to draw water, there was a path she wore back and forth to the hearts of men, hoping they could quench her emotional thirst.

Jesus knew Sam, like us, longed to be loved and pursued for who she was—not for what she could do but simply for herself. The only way He could satisfy the thirst of her soul was to help her see it. He could offer her living water, but first she had to want it, ask for it, and then receive it. And so Jesus took their conversation below the surface:

He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." (John 4:16–18)

Can you imagine Sam's pain? I feel the emptiness in her confession: "I have no husband." It must have been so hard to say those words, knowing she had had five husbands, and then to discover this man already knew so much about her. She had been rejected and abandoned five times.

Sam was uncomfortable and didn't want to go below the surface, so she quickly changed the subject:

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." (John 4:19–20)

Only a prophet could know so much about her, so she asked Him where she should go to church. I wonder if it was her way of saying, “Yes I’ve had five husbands, and I’m living with someone who won’t commit. But it’s no big deal, I’m fine.” Or was it an attempt to cover her sin with good deeds? Was she saying, “My personal life is in shambles, but I’m a good person. I want to do good things. So tell me, where should I go to church, on this mountain or in Jerusalem?”

Have you ever put on a façade that everything was okay when it wasn’t? Have you ever been afraid to let people know who you really are? Wouldn’t you love to be in such a safe place that you could stop pretending and be real with God and yourself (and eventually other people) about where you are and how you got there?

Jesus asked Sam these questions so she would see the pattern of her life and what it was doing to her. He took her below the surface and showed her what was really going on in her heart. He helped Sam see that each broken relationship had convinced her she was not worth staying for.

In the same way, Jesus wants to help you see what is going on in your heart and what you are struggling with that is eroding your security and confidence. If you were sitting with Jesus today, what do you think He’d want to talk about? Perhaps your heart needs to be set free from pretending and perfectionism. Are you longing for others’ approval and wonder why you can never get enough?

Maybe you have experienced the pain of divorce or the devastation of a broken engagement. Have you found yourself in a cycle of unhealthy and destructive relationships and don’t know why? Maybe insecurity or infidelity has caused you to doubt that someone better will ever come along. Maybe you don’t even know what you’re struggling with, and that is okay. Jesus does.

So many times we go through the motions, doing the same things over and over again, hoping something will change. Few of us realize that this repetition is the definition of insanity. Let’s not look back and wish we’d done things differently. Let’s go beneath the surface with Jesus so He can show us places in our hearts that need His repair.

To Be Known Is to Be Loved

Jesus knew Sam’s story and He knows yours. The Greek word for “know” is *yada*. It means a deep emotional experience; a bonding between two people when one truly feels the emotions of the other. Jesus knows your pain, fears, doubts, and disappointments. He understands your dreams and desires.

Although some of us feel uncomfortable that God knows so much about us, it is good to be known, to be listened to and not judged. Jesus is the only One who can meet our deepest needs to be accepted and delighted in simply because of who we are. We can offer nothing but our presence, and He will desire us just the same.

Remember when Jesus told Sam that living water would become a spring in her, welling up to *eternal life*? I used to just skim over the words “eternal life” because they sounded so religious. I knew it meant Sam would get to be with Jesus for eternity, but I didn’t see how that impacted my everyday life. However, one day God showed me why “eternal life” was such a crucial part of His promise to Sam and to us. In John 17:3, Jesus said, “This is eternal life: that they *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (emphasis added).

By offering Sam eternal life, Jesus was offering her the gift of His Holy Spirit, who would cleanse her sins. But even more than that, it would lead her into a relationship where she could *know* the one true God and be known by Him.

Why is that significant? Because Christianity is the only faith that offers a relationship with the living God. We don’t just know *about* our God; our God wants us to *know* Him. We were created for

that kind of relationship. He wants us to find lasting soul-security in knowing we are valued and pursued by the One who knows and loves us—the One who created our inmost being and wove us together in our mother’s womb (Ps. 139:13). Have you let the gospel of God’s grace move from your head to your heart, so that you know without a doubt you are known intimately and loved completely by God?

Our Image of God

I didn’t grow up knowing about God’s love. I didn’t really know God for who He is, and I had no idea He wanted a personal relationship with me. Oftentimes our image of God is shaped by early childhood memories and perceptions, good and bad.

When I was a kid, I perceived God as distant, unavailable, and unapproachable. My image of Him conjured up feelings of fear and judgment instead of protection and acceptance. I wanted to please Him so He wouldn’t get mad at me. I pictured Him on the sidelines of life, keeping score, and I felt like I was always disappointing Him. In a nutshell, I had created God in the image of my father.

My dad showed love by buying me things. So, if God brought good things in my life, I felt His approval. My dad showed disappointment through withdrawal and anger. When life was hard and I was lonely, I wondered what I had done wrong and if God was turning His back on me.

When I was twelve years old, my mom remarried and we moved to a small town in North Carolina. When you live in the Bible Belt, going to church every Sunday is like going to the swimming pool on hot summer days. It’s just what you do, so I did.

That is when I started hearing about God’s grace, love, and forgiveness. I heard how Jesus died for our sins and wants a relationship with us. Over time I came to know God for who He is through the person of Jesus Christ, who is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb. 1:3).

I discovered that God was not created in my father’s image, but that as God’s child I was created in His image instead. I was made to know Him and be known by Him—and so are you. Are there images of God in your heart that need to be replaced, repaired, or restored?

More Than Knowing

A personal relationship with God sets us free to be all we were created to be. As children of God we were designed to find our identity, our significance, and our confidence in Him. When we respond to God’s invitation and accept Jesus’ gift of salvation, we don’t just accept a new philosophy of life. We establish a personal relationship with our Creator, the One who knows us and accepts us fully, but who also desires our transformation so we can become all He created us to be.

Remember back to the day I was painting our house? As I stood on the ladder, I thought about how badly the repairs were needed after all. I was no longer mad that someone in our neighborhood had come up close and gotten very personal. Instead, I was glad they cared enough to notice and tell us.

So it is with Jesus. He notices and cares enough to tell us that our hearts need repair. He won’t leave a notice on our front door, but He did leave Himself as a love letter nailed to the cross of Calvary, declaring the depth of His perfect love. Through His death and resurrection, we are offered the gift of new life through the Holy Spirit and lasting security through our relationship with Christ.

The only way we’ll have a confident heart is if we move beyond knowing about God to knowing and relying on Him—to depending on His Word with our whole heart, mind, and soul.

Maybe you are like me; you have believed in Him for years—but you haven't really *believed* Him completely. At least you don't always feel or live like His promises are true for you. Maybe you know God loves you and forgives you, but you still beat yourself up for mistakes you've made and the way you think you've let Him and others down.

Today can be the day the gospel of grace moves from your head to your heart. Today can be the day you take your first steps out of the shadows of doubt and start really living in the truth.

Will you let your desire to be known and loved just as you are lead you into a more personal and intimate relationship with Jesus? The first step is to embrace your imperfections in the light of God's perfect love, "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

I also know it's possible that you are in a different place. A new place. An unknown place. Like Sam, maybe you know about God but you don't personally know God. I am so glad you have made it to this point and that you are taking this journey with me. I can only imagine how God is smiling now. I know how much He wants to give you His grace and truth. He's also inviting you into an up close and personal relationship through Jesus so that you can know Him, be set free through His forgiveness, and experience the fullness of His love.

If you would like to accept Jesus as Lord of your life, you can pray the following prayer or use it as a guide to create your own. Just talk to God from your heart, with honesty and sincerity.

Lord, I am sorry that I have done things to separate myself from You and other people. I confess I have sinned against You and ask You to forgive me. I acknowledge that I could never earn salvation by my good works, but I come to You and put my trust in what Jesus did for me on the cross. I believe You love me and that Jesus died and rose again so that I can be forgiven and come to know You. Come into my heart and be Lord of my life. I trust You and thank You for loving me so much that I can know You up close and personal here on earth, and spend the rest of eternity with You in heaven. In Jesus' name Amen.

Sweet friend, wherever you are, Jesus meets you there. You and I are not worthy of His love and we can never do anything to deserve it—but we are worth His love because He chose to give it to us. We are His! Hold on to this promise and live in the power of its truth: because God's love is perfect, you don't have to be!

Praying God's Promises

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, give me the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that I may know Him better. I want to know and rely on the love You have for me, Jesus, and live in that love. You say that whoever lives in love lives in You, and You in him. In this way, love is made complete in me, so that I can have confidence today and forever. I want an up close and personal relationship with You, one where I don't have to pretend or hide.

When I feel insecure, insignificant, or unloved, remind me of Your perfect love that has the power to cast out my fear. Thank You for Your love that is patient, is kind, and keeps no record of my wrongs. I trust that because Your love is perfect, I don't have to be. I will remain in Your love and be confident of this: that He who began a good work in me will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

See Ephesians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3; 1 John 4:16–18; 1 Corinthians 13:4–5; John 15:9; Philippians 1:6.

Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. Think back to your childhood and your first memory of God. Describe your image of Him growing up.
2. How does your childhood perception of God compare to what you see in Christ through His interaction with Sam? List the similarities and differences.
3. Do you ever feel like you are the only one who struggles with insecurity or doubt? Why or why not?
4. Jesus wants to create a safe place for you to be transparent with Him where you can ask questions and be real about your desires, doubts, disappointments, and dreams. He knows you and wants you to really know Him. Is the thought of this kind of relationship with God comforting or uncomfortable, and why?
5. Has anything ever happened that caused you to distance yourself from God or other people? How does it make you feel to know Jesus understands, and He is still there with you in every moment of every day? When do you need His assurance and presence most?
6. Reread Sam's story in John 4, asking Jesus to meet you there and show you things in your heart that need His repair. Is there part of my story or Sam's story that you relate to most?
7. What lesson from this chapter will you walk away with and hold on to so that you can live in the security of God's approval and acceptance?

Finding Love That Won't Fail Even When I Do

How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

Psalm 36:7

One Sunday afternoon I was feeling a little lost, in between my new life with Christ and my old life without Him. It was the last semester of my senior year at Meredith College, and there was something in my heart I just couldn't settle. I had felt empty and confused for so much of my life, and I couldn't figure out why all the relationships and things I had worked so hard for couldn't fill me or fulfill me.

I decided to go for a walk under the canopy of oak trees lining the road that encircled campus. Pressing my hands into my pockets, I pulled my jacket tight, breathed in the fresh air, and lifted my face toward the blue sky. The smell of azaleas and a cool breeze contrasted with the warmth of the sun against my cheeks and made me wonder how I could live in such a beautiful place for four years and still feel so empty and unhappy.

Life looked great on the outside: I was about to graduate with honors and had job offers, a new boyfriend, and a cute sports car. But on the inside I was dying a slow and lonely emotional death that my doctor had diagnosed as clinical depression. I thought about how I had filled my schedule and my mind with activities and responsibilities to the point of overload. I was hoping they would distract me from my emptiness.

When overcommitment didn't work, I tried to drink my way out of the pain. But my escape from the darkness into a place of temporary happiness would usually wear off by the next morning. My efforts to dig my way out of the pit were more like a shovel that dug a deeper hole for my heart to dwell in, a hollow place in my soul where feelings of hopelessness held me hostage. The more I did and the more I had, the more I questioned why I wasn't satisfied—and the more I doubted that I ever would be.

The Things We Do for Love

As I walked that day, my eyes drifted to the buildings, dorms, and other landmarks of my memories. Suddenly my mind was filled with a collage of faces, reminding me of my efforts and the people I had hoped could fill my emptiness. Seeing the admissions building made me think about my mom and how much she wanted me to go to Meredith College.

It wasn't a school we could afford. I had needed loans, scholarships, and grants. My stepfather insisted I could never go there, which made Mom even more determined that I would. The day she arrived I pulled up under the arch of welcome balloons, parked in front of the admissions building, and went through freshman check-in was my first day ever to set foot on campus.

I wanted to make my mom happy, so I agreed to move in with people I had never met and attend a

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