

Remember This Truth When You're Aching for Resurrection

I slid my hand into his, weeping.

I remember, even before we dated, noticing that musician's hands. They'd pounded thousands and thousands of hours away on the piano's keys. And I thought, "I'd like to hold one of those hands someday."

And now, nearly seven years into marriage, that strong, tender hand of his has become a home for mine.

We strolled along the sea's edge that evening, my womb bulging, making continuous announcement of our soon-coming season change. We thanked God for the precious gift, for the baby girl we'd yet to hold but already adored.

Autumn's leaves had just recently begun to put on their show of bursting colors, and a crisp breeze washed over us as we walked together. Nature's new season was making its announcement, too. The blaze of summer was gone, and the refreshing winds of fall wrapped around us. All three of us.

My tears fell as we walked, a mix of joy and sobriety and the heavy remembrance of the fires we'd walked through in the last few years. The recent years had broken me—my body had broken with chronic pain that doctors had struggled to diagnose and had led physical therapists to advise me to wait on childbearing, my soul had torn wide open as I watched a dear friend's marriage come to an end, my hope had nearly unraveled altogether with prayer's delayed answers and my heart had bled with a grief deeper than I'd ever touched when I lost my father to cancer.

But my husband had not let me break alone. He'd broken with me. And somehow, in the midst of all the pain and ache and fire, it had become a beautiful brokenness—of our hearts before God.

Now here we were, hand-in-hand by the sea—looking back at those aching years, and looking ahead with hope at the years still to unfold, all in one moment.

My husband put his hand on my womb. The little life that was filling me was speaking something to us, something that hinted of the breakthroughs we'd been crying to heaven for.

This tiny babe reminded and displayed to us one of the miracles of God's workings.

After the storm, He brings the harvest.

After death, He brings resurrection and life.

It's God's way. It's how He writes the most beautiful of stories.

Pain and tears and death and storm had swept through our worlds. But the rain doesn't fall without causing something to grow up from the ground, right?

I wanted to gather beauty out of this storm. I ached for resurrection—for new life to be birthed from a season when so much had seemed to die.

I remember bringing my broken self before God one morning last spring, with more of my tears, telling Him I wanted a harvest, telling Him I didn't want all of this rain to be wasted, telling Him I wanted beauty to spring up.

And one thing I asked Him for was a baby, in my womb, *that month*.

One week later, I found out my womb held a life. His harvest

had begun. And He'd started it in my very frame.

He's the one who changes our times and our seasons, the one who is faithful to bring bounty after the rain has fallen, the one who delights to give us good gifts.

For His children, God's stories don't end with storm and death.

No, He's still writing.

This story of mine isn't over yet. And neither is yours. God is faithful. And He invites us, urges us to cling to who He is.

As we pass through trials, we can hold fast His strong hand. Because in Him and through Him, harvest and resurrection and beauty are sure to come. {eoa}

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God the Father's Life-Changing Declaration Over You This Christmas

A circle of kindergartners sat before me, each eagerly waiting their turn to voice their Christmas wishes. I chose Max to go next.

“And what would you like for Christmas this year, Max?”

His little chipmunk face became very serious, and with great solemnity, he looked me in the eye and declared, “A sword.”

“Wow!” I said softly in awe. “That would be a pretty amazing gift.”

A few other children took turns making their excited requests known. “A bike,” “A basketball,” “A dollhouse.”

I then turned to a newer child in the class. Having recently been placed into a new foster home, it had been just a few weeks since he joined this little company of 5- and 6-year-olds who called me their teacher. Though all of the children in my class came from impoverished homes, I knew this boy was the poorest of all. At 5 years old, he was without a mom or dad, without a family, and in his little heart, he saw himself as having no identity either. He bore the soul wounds of one who'd been abused and rejected, and now he lived with strangers.

What would this little boy request as a Christmas gift? My heart ached to ask him, because I knew that deep down inside that 5-year-old was a cry for so many things. A cry that went far beyond a child's desire for a bike or a basketball or a dollhouse. When I looked into his eyes, I could devastatingly feel his silent, resonating ache to be wanted, to be loved and to belong.

“What would you like for Christmas?”

That little one rocked back and forth for a few moments, his eyes glued to the carpet. He was a shy and withdrawn boy, and I watched with a wringing heart as he mustered up the courage to speak in front of his peers.

He then responded, “A Christmas tree.”

I thought about how small a request this was. But then I began

to think again about his other wants that he hadn't voiced in our kindergarten circle.

Family, Love, Permanence

As I considered these longings in his young heart, I realized that just as the Christmas tree seemed like so little to ask for, neither were these other desires such tremendous requests. He *should* have a mom and a dad, and it was an injustice to him that he did not have either.

I'm made to remember the words that Jesus spoke as His time for death drew nearer. *"I will not leave you as orphans,"* He promised (John 14:18). God isn't unaware of the orphan's plight and the desperate longings that cry out from within these lonely hearts.

In speaking this promise, He was saying to us, *"You are not unwanted. You are not unloved. You are not alone. You are meant to belong to the Father."*

Before the world's foundations, adoption stirred in the Father's heart. He wanted us.

He marked us with a destiny to be brought into His family through Jesus Christ.

And so the Father sent His Son to pursue.

Jesus descended to the earth in the humility of a baby's frame. And through this babe, the Father declared His desire over us.

"You are chosen, valuable, worthy of love."

Looking into the eyes of this tender Child, we see a God who has come near, and has withheld nothing from us. We were far off. Lost. Orphaned. And the Father reached out with His Son, and brought us in. With passionate intent, Jesus went to a cross so that we, orphaned as we were, may enter the

Father's arms.

Now, as we lean into the embrace of our Father, who has made us His own, may we marvel again at the awe and the beauty of our own adoption stories.

And may we be compelled to imitate the very expression of this love that has been lavished upon us, that we too would embrace the orphaned, ones like that little boy who simply wanted a Christmas tree. And may they be given new names, just as the Father has given us new names.

We are no longer orphans—but sons and daughters. {eoa}

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The Most Impactful—and Inexpensive—Gift You Can Give This Christmas

Children waved gleefully, poking their heads out of their bedroom windows to greet us as our red van pulled down the muddy driveway.

My heart flipped, and tears came to my eyes when I saw the explosive smile of one brown-skinned gypsy boy, so excited to welcome the strangers. I looked over at my husband, who had let out a grieved sigh. “Oh man ...” he breathed out heavily, his eyes brimming with tears.

A light rain was falling as we stepped out of our van. We stood out in the drizzle, shaking hands with the orphanage worker who came to meet us.

The place felt desolate.

My heart reeled at the utter emptiness that brooded over the atmosphere of the place.

I walked toward a door at the back of the building as the orphanage director beside me led the way.

“How often do people visit these children?” I asked her.

“Just at Christmas time, usually, and sometimes other holidays. Maybe Easter,” she told me.

We were the unusual September visitors. It had been months since strangers had stepped into their worlds, and they were eager to receive us.

We came with a trunk-load of school supplies for the 47 children who lived within those orphanage walls. But more so, we came with hearts wanting to be broken again for forgotten children whom many do not see and most will never meet.

That day, I looked with the Father, whose eyes had ever been looking, who knew each of the stories living inside of that building. He and I saw together.

I stepped into a building with 47 orphan stories inside. We walked through the hallways, offering our greetings to each room of boys and girls we passed.

We met the shy ones, the squirmy ones, the excited ones and the cool ones. From age 4 all the way to 18, they came. One of the really short ones, the youngest of the whole bunch, shuffled over to my husband and offered his small hand to shake. Jon squatted down to 4-year-old height.

Word by word, the little boy repeated what the translator whispered in his ear. His choppy sentence was executed with a brilliantly thick accent. "Hello. My. Name. Is. Jon."

Big Jon smiled at little Jon. "Hey! That's my, name too!" They had their special moment. (Because it's not every day a tiny orphaned gypsy boy meets a tall white American who shares his name.)

More children came to offer their hellos and to give affection-starved hugs. My eyes scanned the room for a few moments, watching some kids make their blue yarn bracelets, others playing "Simon Says" and still others chatting away with the visitors who'd come to listen.

These are some of the most important people in the world. The thought pressed into my heart. These who have taken the lowest place in society are the ones to whom God, Father to the fatherless, has joined His name.

Still, as important as they are, they are only visited once or twice a year.

No matter what nation they live in, the orphaned everywhere consider themselves to be the forgotten ones, the rejected ones, the unwanted ones.

Visitors maybe come by to be a blessing on the holidays. But what about the other days?

I know a man who grew up within the foster system who now looks back at his childhood Christmases and feels a sting. He of course loved the presents that were delivered to his group home. But the holidays would inevitably pass, and life would go on as before—with new toys but no one to sow into his greater need. His heart hemorrhaged with aches of loneliness, rejection and despair.

Though gifts were delivered, there was rarely a face or a

heart that decided to stay beyond the holiday.

But it is consistent presence that holds the power to unlock, to heal, to express deep love.

The orphaned need presence.

And really, we all do.

We need eye-to-eye, face-to-face, hand-in-hand, heart-to-heart—we need that which can minister to our heart-throbbing, God-infused desire:

To know love.

It's our freedom, our healing, our destiny.

Christ has loved us, not from a distance. No, He came up close, got into the dust with us. He shattered high walls, broke chains, shined His light into dark places.

His nearness—His words spoken, His embraces given, His willingness to sweat and bleed and embrace weariness for us—gave us life and let us trade hopelessness for hope.

So yes, let's certainly give with generous hearts to the forgotten ones on the holidays. But what if we stuck around a little longer than a day or two, got into the dust with them and loved up close? {eoa}

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Why You Shouldn't Wear Paint-On Leggings

We live in a culture that tells women to be skinny, and to show their skin—a culture that has driven some of us mad, as we've been lured into its insanity.

I remember a teenage girl who stepped on the scale every single day of her life and measured her worth by the numbers between her feet. She constantly made out diet plans, had an unofficial list of “forbidden” high-calorie and carb foods, and did internal penance if she missed a day of exercise.

She was me, hanging in painful insecurity, feeling powerless in my wearied reaches to measure up. And other girls my age hung with me.

But bound with us were also those in their twenties, thirties, forties, fifties ... and I saw that the fingers of deception weren't necessarily generationally particular concerning who they fastened in their grip. But they liked to start young.

A culture drunk with worldliness has feigned beauty for us—flashing its images and pictures, dangling before us an erroneous definition of the word, and ensnaring many in the lie.

The lie that whispers and pierces us with fabricated assurances that man's admiration is where happiness is found.

It feels inescapable in a culture that relentlessly screams at us, *Look like this!* and *Wear this!*

These days I see girls sacrifice modesty to join in with the latest trends, decided by whoever the fashion designers were that season—and I literally hurt inside over it. Because yes, I've been there. I've wanted to be up-to-date in fashion, and

(let's be honest) I didn't mind if I drew the attention of a cute boy or two—even if it meant laying aside some discretion.

But truth is, there is no substance in complimenting a culture's ever-changing image. **Honorable eyes, and honorable men, will see beyond, much deeper, to the beauty fashioned in the Creator's image.** And deep down, maybe even a little beneath our own consciousness, our hearts know the difference between the two. The former holds us captive, while the latter unlocks our true identity, and our true beauty—the beauty that the world seeks to layer over with its impressions and ideas, but the Spirit has the power to unearth and declare.

Men might cast their admiring eyes and approving votes, but when the approval is nothing more than the shallow endorsement of the world's simulated idea of beauty, it comes as a dagger in disguise, leaving our hearts bleeding more than before the flattery ever came.

Because the human heart was designed to desire something deeper.

And sometimes it takes a while, sometimes years, to realize that you are even bleeding. But women, we've all received the wound. When magazine covers in the grocery line tell us that our beauty is in being barely clothed, when box-office hits tell us that sex has nothing to do with love and cherishing and life-long covenant, when men's scanning eyes look us up and down like our worth is wrapped up in curves and skin.

As I stepped into my second year of college, I began a journey of finding myself before, and of letting myself be defined by, another set of eyes. The eyes of the One who fashioned this frame. My heart started moving toward its healing, and I started believing, down in my deep, that He who *is* beauty, who *creates* beauty, is the only One with the authority to define it.

I broke free then. And I decided that I actually really love

cheeseburgers and pizza, a lot, and that no man other than my someday husband was ever going to see my cleavage. I was saving my skin for the man who would love me, for life.

And now, well over a decade later, I know it's a heart's life-long journey of remembering and re-surrendering to the truth that liberates.

I'm still and always free, so long as I cling to Jesus who frees me.

As summer comes to us again, and as the bikinis and short skirts and short shorts (you know, the ones that hang just a few centimeters below the bum) start showing up, I decidedly reserve things like that as "wear-at-home clothes." Truth be told, I have short shorts and low-cut tanks, and I'm sure my husband wouldn't mind if I wore a bikini (so long as we were the only two people at the pool). But these things are for my husband's eyes, only.

Amid other eyes, I'm taking the modest route. It's not about the religiosity, and it doesn't mean wearing ankle length skirts, baggy pants and turtle necks. Modesty doesn't mean forgoing all fashion sense.

This is about my dignity, about knowing my beauty in shirts that cover my lower chest and dresses that cover my upper thighs.

And, it's about my husband's honor.

I respect this man that I've covenanted myself to. My body is for him. My skin is for him, and I'm not going to make an inappropriate amount of it available to other men's eyes. I saved my body and my skin for him before marriage, and it is still for him—just for him.

Back when he and I were dating, I remember him introducing me to one of his friends—a guy I recognized from church, but had

never met. After our introduction (I learned later), he pulled Jon aside to give his thoughts on “the girlfriend.” And one of the things he said really surprised me. He said, “I’ve noticed that she dresses modestly. I bet you appreciate that.” Come to find out, my modest way of dressing was actually one of the things that sparked Jon’s interest and drew him to me.

Not every girl is necessarily trying to draw a guy’s attention in the way she dresses. Some are simply aiming to be fashionable. But we need to be aware.

Men notice how we dress, whatever way we dress.

A man of God will bring true praise that agrees with God’s praise of you—not just in what he says, but in how he acts towards you. If a man is drawn to you because you’re wearing short dresses or low-cut shirts, we have two problems—he doesn’t know how valuable you are, and neither do you. That man is incapable of giving you the honor that your heart needs.

This is about your honor, and the honor of husbands and husbands-to-be.

This is about the honor of the One who made, fearfully and wonderfully, that frame of yours.

And this is about helping our brothers around us. There’s no question that men are extremely visually-driven. A multi-billion-dollar porn industry proves it. And why would we hang temptation before other men—whether it be the stranger in the grocery store or the man sitting a few seats down the row in church? We’ve got to love our brothers by helping them help themselves. And that can be as simple as skipping out on the revealing shirts and paint-on leggings.

If I could talk to the women just for a moment, as sisters, I’d just want to say something you’ve heard before, but it bears repeating: You are immeasurably valuable to the Father,

and He deeply desires that we know it. Our culture has spoken otherwise, but we need God's truth to run into our hearts. Beauty is not measured by the clothes that we wear or the skin that we show or the numbers on a scale or how flat our tummies are or how big our breasts are or how tan our skin is or any other number of things that media's changing opinions throw at us.

Women are being crushed under the weight of a deteriorating culture. And what we need, counter to one more woman displaying her body in a broken world, is women who will weep over their sisters, who will get down on their faces before God and contend for deliverance, who will embrace a bleeding woman's heart and tell her that her worth reaches far beyond a fickle world's esteem—because sometimes we just need to hear it spoken over us.

What we need is men who are grown-up in God, matured in the Holy Spirit, able to control every part of their bodies—even *their eyes*—in dignity and honor. What a woman wears does not force the way a man responds. He always has a choice of where to put his eyes. And what we need is men who will be serious and relentless in guarding their eye gate, who will not drink in the drunkenness of the world, who will value purity more than they value their hormones, who will declare in word and in action the dignity and worth and sacredness of the stunning creation God pulled from his side.

Let He who is beauty, who creates beauty, define it.

The most beautiful One has stamped us with His image.

Beauty isn't a world's feigned idea. Beauty is a heart that is the Lord's.

Beauty is who He is making us on the inside.

Beauty is beneath the surface, too deep for culture, or even

time, to manipulate—so that when media casts changing opinions, or when we're pregnant and swollen and 50 pounds heavier, or when our hair starts graying and wrinkles start invading ... beauty can still shine as bright as it ever did.

Because beauty is God-made and God-infused in a heart that beholds Him and refuses to look away.

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Getting God's Dream

Often, when people stare at a crisis, our thoughts seem more quickly inclined to *Let's Do*, instead of *Let's Pray*.

"Okay. The prayer thing, but we need to *do something*."

We are so eager to *do something* (and just for the record, I absolutely believe that we should do something). But in our eagerness to act, prayer is often put on the back burner or shoved to the side, while it actually needs to be our very foundation and the fire that is fueling our every move.

We cannot underestimate the importance of prayer's centrality.

A little over 10 years ago, I had some stirrings arise in my heart for orphaned children. So I acted on this interest and interned with an adoption agency one summer between college semesters. With a small group of other Americans, I traveled to Russia and spent about a month ministering to the nation's fatherless, living in their orphanages with them. I was with the children hours each day—eating with them, talking with

them, playing games with them.

After the time spent in Russia, I had the urge to relocate somewhere overseas and work among the orphaned. These children had impacted my heart in a life-defining way. I could not imagine going back to “life as usual.”

But. But sometimes God has a different course than the one we had in mind for ourselves.

The fourth summer I went to Russia, I felt from the Lord that it was the last time. I didn't know if that meant the last time for a while or the last time forever, but I knew when I said goodbye to the children that summer, these who I had come to know and love so much, that I wouldn't be seeing them again, at least in this age. I throbbed inside, wanting to understand the Lord's leadership, but not understanding.

I came back to Kansas City, with the desire to minister to the fatherless so strong in my heart. But there was no orphan ministry around, at least that I knew of. My heart wrestled, having no outlet for the burden that was burning inside of me.

But I remember a defining moment with the Lord that ultimately altered the trajectory of my life and ministry.

I longed to be among the orphaned—and God said to me, so clearly, “Kinsey, let it go, and let Me hold that dream.”

I didn't know what to do with that. *How could I let it go?*

So, still aching within, I threw Him my rebuttal. “But Lord, what about the orphans?” His response didn't seem to answer my question at the time.

“I want you to pray,” my heart heard Him whisper.

And well, having no other known outlets to serve these children, I began to pray. Like I never had before. Some days I felt rote and unexciting, and on other days God brought me

to holy tears wept over their lives. I filled journals with prayers for these kids.

And as I prayed consistently, God began giving me a very precious gift.

He started releasing to me His burden and His heart for the fatherless.

It was bigger than what I had felt before. Much bigger.

Though I'd been ready to move across the ocean and leave all the familiars of life—*what I felt now was bigger still.*

The burden began to grow in my heart to such an extent that I was tempted to say at times, "Lord, I can't take anymore."

But rather than making this my prayer, someone wisely counseled me to instead pray, "*Lord expand my heart's capacity to hold all that You want to give me.*"

The Lord called me away to pray, and something beautiful happened. When I really began to enter into that place of prayer, the Father of the fatherless drew me into His heart and began to give me a deeper taste of what He feels for a fatherless generation of children. It was something greater than I could have imagined, something beyond what I could have ever produced in myself—*something that could only be found in prayer.*

A gift found within a gift.

There in the gift of simple intimacy with my Father, I met Him heart to heart, felt Him weep and let His tears overflow into me, becoming mine. And His love for me, for them, overwhelmed me.

I see now what I didn't see those years ago. My vision will ever remain too small and my ability to bring true justice hindered unless the effort to minister to the fatherless is

born out of an intimate prayer partnership with Jesus.

And so we pray, while also asking for abundant grace to put action to our prayers.

God wants to do something beyond our own ability. He wants to impart to us the depths of His own heart, to find those who will be a resting place for His emotions, and to release through us a movement of justice fueled by the power of His own Spirit.

Who cares about these children more than any of us do? Who is the only One who has the power to restore a broken story and heal a shattered heart? Who is He who has taken the highest seat in all of creation, who is enthroned in the heavens, and who has called Himself a Father to the fatherless?

We want to intimately connect with the heart of our God, our Father, our Friend over these children. *We actually want to talk to Him, to closely engage His heart.*

So for these 40 weeks, we're leaning in. We're asking Him to bring us into His precious burden for the orphaned. We asking Him to share dreams in His heart that we have yet to conceive.

What does He want to do? In our nation? In this fatherless generation? In our churches? In our families? In our hearts?

What are the desires of God's heart?

Come up close. Listen. Pray. And dream big with God.

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God's Call to Pray for This Crisis

I remember the girl who said to me, "I wish I had a normal life."

Her words pierced me through. It was a legitimate wish. Her life *wasn't* normal, and I could convince neither her nor myself that it was.

Instead of a home, she lived in a facility. I'd seen her room—the one that she'd sarcastically referred to as her jail cell. And to be fair to her, it did look like one—composed of nothing but a small bed and four concrete walls.

But this was no jail, in the literal sense, as you or I would think of it.

This was a residence for foster kids who were waiting for available and willing foster families. This place, with its bare concrete walls and florescent lights, caught some of the foster system's "overflow." And here she lived—longing for a normal life, longing for a home, longing for a family.

"I wish you had a normal life too," I told her, after a few moments of silence together.

A crisis permeates America. This young girl is just one face, one life, one story—among 400,000 displaced children in this nation.

And compounding the crisis is the unsettling reality that though they live only some minutes' drive away, these who long

for “normal” are unseen by most. They are unheard by most. And many of us have maybe not even known that they exist.

In 2013, about 255,000 children entered into foster care. Averaged out, that’s about 700 abused and neglected kids entering the system every single day—*today even*. But we aren’t even blinking ... because the governmental care of our children has become culturally normal.

But this should not feel normal to our hearts.

Church, we need to weep.

We need to fall on our faces before the God of heaven, before the God who is a Father to the fatherless—and ask Him to have mercy on a nation, to shift a broken culture, to restore a generation suffering under abuse and neglect and fatherlessness.

We need to pray.

What if we arose on their behalf? What if we really prayed? What would happen in the lives of children?

And what would happen in the heart of God’s church?

For 40 weeks, we are going to sow prayers into a dry and broken generation.

Many of us will sow tears.

And the unfolding years ahead will show and tell of our prayers’ fruit.

Church, let’s pray.

God has joined His name to these children. Oh, that He would pull us into the burden of His heart for them.

Will you pray for them?

How are we, scattered across the nation, going to do this in unity? It's simple:

- **Each week for 40 weeks, I will be sending out a point of focus for our prayers.** Come find me on Instagram or the new Facebook public page to see our prayer focuses *every week, beginning March 29*. Pray in your secret place with the Lord, pray as a family, pray with friends or with your church's small group—however you want to pray, let's just pray. Let's truly engage with God's heart over these children.
- **Also, join in with Jon and me each Friday at 10 a.m. (CST) during our weekly prayer meeting for the fatherless.** Over 1,000 are already joining in via web each week. Understandably, you might not be able to join us for each one, but take part as often as you can (via live stream or archives).

We are going to link arms and pray for a fatherless generation, to stand as their intercessors, to be a voice for these who have no voice.

JOIN IN.

What's the Burden of God's Heart Right Now?

A few years back, I was preparing to share a message about the orphaned and fatherless with a missions organization. I was wrestling with the idea of giving this talk—not because I didn't have things I wanted to say, but because I wanted it to be much more than me talking about “a moving issue.”

Truth is, when we hear about justice issues, emotions get stirred. And rightly so. We *should* stir over babies' heartbeats being stopped in their mother's wombs; over women and children trafficked into rings where bodies are cyclically raped and ravaged; over children removed from their families, by law, because they were starved, abused, and neglected.

In fact, God's own emotions are stirred. He's not stoic when He looks down at the little girl being trafficked as a slave or when the life He's fashioning in the womb has a scheduled injection to end its life. The Father feels. And His emotions are perfect, holy and untainted.

But our emotions, unlike His, can sometimes go awry, becoming soiled with our own human ambition and pride. And here, hidden behind our well-intended zeal, lies our potential pitfall.

We want to fight. We want to change things. We want to make a difference.

And, because it is the tendency of all men to move in their own strength, we often do. And thus, we neglect to ask God to move in His.

The Lord is looking for far more than a justice movement fueled by man's anger and fervor against the wrong.

Many across the earth are championing groups who are lifting up their voices and shaking their fists at the injustices that have come against our children. Believers and unbelievers alike are speaking out against human trafficking, are building homes and schools for the poor, are adopting the orphaned.

But if Jesus is not at the core of our move, is it truly justice?

What really makes Christians who care for the afflicted and the orphaned different from those outside the church who do the same?

With these thoughts pressing on my heart, I prepared to share with this group of young twenty-somethings. I knew I could show pictures of cute kids and tell sad stories. But that wasn't enough. God wanted something deeper. Something that went beyond stirring up mere sentiment.

After talking with my husband, we decided to shorten my talk with this group and instead devote a portion of the time to prayer. And to my surprise, the leadership of the ministry, not knowing of my intended plans, asked me to do just that: They asked me to lead a prayer meeting.

So I stood up before this little gathering, and I told them of 400,000 children in our nation who did not have homes or families. I told them of more than 100,000 orphaned who were waiting for adoption. I told them of the common story of severe abuse and neglect, of deep wounds of fatherlessness, that all of these children share. I told them of 20,000 teenagers who age out of the foster system every year, unadopted.

And then, together, we lifted up the orphan before the throne of heaven, asking Him to break our hearts for them. We asked God to turn hearts of fathers back to their children. We asked for the arising of godly, anointed families. We asked for the healing and salvation of young, broken hearts.

We entered into the place of prayer as one body, and the Father of the fatherless drew us into His heart and gave us a taste of what He feels.

And some began to weep, not because I prodded their emotions, but because we went to the place of prayer and met God's heart.

Yes, weep over the fatherless.

But Why?

Why do even the unbelieving who do not know God and do not love His Son weep over orphans, trafficked victims and starving children?

Why do people, inside and outside of the church, bring orphans into their homes?

The reason we weep, the reason we put our hands to the crises around us, is more important than can rightly be expressed in writing. God is looking for much more than our tears and our efforts to do something "good" in our fallen world.

He wants to bring us into the very burden of His heart.

We need His vision, and if we are not praying, we do not have it. No one can tell it to you or describe it to you. It is deeper than words, and attempting to put it into words only seems to lessen its weightiness. We have to go get it ourselves, and we can only find it in prayer—when our hearts touch the heart of God, the heart of the Great Intercessor, the heart of the Father.

Our vision will remain too small and our ability to bring true justice hindered unless our effort to minister to the fatherless is born out of an intimate prayer partnership with Jesus.

God wants to do something that is beyond our own ability, something fueled not by our human zeal and sentiment but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Giving food to the poor, building homes for the needy and even bringing orphans into our homes are good and necessary things—but alone, they will not necessarily give these destitute ones true and full justice.

We don't just want to give orphaned children a different living situation. Along with seeing them in homes or having their bellies filled, we want to contend for the salvation and

restoration of their souls. And apart from the power of God, we cannot see their full restoration—body, soul and spirit.

We want to see the afflicted ones step into the destiny God desires for them—and if this isn't the ambition and vision, if the aim is only to feed, clothe and house them, we are not delivering full justice. We're simply making them a little more comfortable on earth while hell is still before them if they aren't led to Jesus.

We have to point them to their Healer, their Savior, their God.

God wants to save and restore a fatherless generation of children.

Prayer—intimate connection with the heart of God—must be primary in our movements against injustice. This is what makes Christian orphan care different from what the world is doing for orphans.

The core must truly be Jesus.

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What God Calls Pure and Undefined Religion

The kids were dirty; the food was terrible; the showers (when we had running water) were freezing; there was not one restroom with toilet paper in it; I got really sick one

summer; I got a staph infection another summer—but somehow, it was a little bit of heaven on earth to me.

I loved holding their grimy hands. I loved sitting at their orphanage tables with them, even if we were eating mystery meat (and a mysterious porridge that seriously resembled Elmer's glue). I loved running around and playing games with them.

But most of all, I loved getting eye-to-eye with them, giving them my full attention, and hearing their stories.

I can't ever forget those stories.

These orphans across the ocean weren't merely social issues and statistics. They became my friends.

I saw the scarred arms of a teen who'd tried to take her own life. I held the skinny, malnourished frame of a 10-year-old who was otherwise rarely, or maybe never, embraced. I felt the clinging grip of a 12-year-old girl who'd wrapped herself around me, sobbing, asking me to please not leave.

These children changed me. And I knew I wanted to spend my life serving them. I wanted to move to Africa. Or Eastern Europe. Or really, any far off land.

Wherever I ended up living, there was just one condition I required that place to meet: There had to be orphans there. And in my thinking at that time, I thought working with orphans required a move across the ocean.

So imagine my confusion and wrestle when I felt God clearly telling me to put down roots in Kansas City, Missouri. I actually rebutted with, *"But Lord, what about the orphans?"*

But God knew what He was doing, of course.

He wanted to broaden my vision.

My mind's picture of "orphan" was that of a child in a dusty village, in a crowded orphanage, or on the street in an economically developing nation.

But I was missing something.

Those overseas trips were unquestionably valuable—to the children, to the Lord and to my own heart. ***But I'd been solely far-sighted.*** And thus, I missed what was right in front of me. Right down the road.

One day—a day I know will always mark me—I met a 4-year-old boy who was living with some friends of mine. And he asked me to hold him.

I was a stranger. He was desperate for a safe place to lay his head.

He was fatherless, floating around in foster care, longing for security, longing for love, longing to belong somewhere and to someone.

So I held him because he asked. And as I held him, my heart was pierced through. *My eyes were opened.* The truth that would initially surprise me, *just before it seared me,* is that the orphan's reality runs through America too.

More than 400,000 displaced children are right here in America.

And in these recent years, I've started coming up close to them, and getting into their lives.

"Foster kids," we call them. Our affluent nation has set aside third-world terminology like "orphans."

Instead of having *orphans* who live in *orphanages*, we have *foster children* who live in *residential treatment facilities*.

Different terms. Same reality.

Now, I know some of their names. I know some of their stories. I've sat at their lunch tables. I've run around and played games with them. I've listened to their hearts.

They don't know a family's embrace or the permanence of a place they can truly call "home." These children are shuffled through the foster system, finding residence either in foster families, or in group facilities (our present-day orphanages) **which currently house over 50,000 of our nation's displaced children.**

Today, more than 100,000 of America's kids have been given the name "waiting children" because they are in need of adoptive families. Their biological families' rights have been legally severed, and they are in need of new families who will embrace them.

And so, they wait.

If James 1:27 tells us that **pure and undefiled religion in the eyes of our Father is to care for orphans and widows**, then none of us as believers in Jesus Christ are exempt from this call.

For too many of us, when we think of "caring for orphans," our minds jump straight to adoption. And it feels kind of scary—unmapped, even overwhelming, territory. So what ends up happening? Many count themselves out of the call to "serve orphans" because they don't feel ready to make that leap.

God is indeed looking for open hearts and homes where He can set the lonely. And there is no question that many more courageous families need to arise and embrace the orphaned. But the truth is, there is an easy inroad to serving these children for *every single one of us*—for those who have adopted; for those who are thinking about it; for those who want to do something, but don't know what or how; for those who, like me, had never even realized that the orphaned even existed in America.

Want to know what it is?

Prayer.

We must pray for them.

My husband and I have not adopted. It is in our hearts for the future of our family. But we're not *waiting* until then to serve the orphan. In these recent years, God has highlighted to us that a primary way of loving these children, of fighting for their lives, is to stand in the place of intercession for them.

Our strongest place of action in coming against injustice is not in reaching out our hands only, but in bowing our hearts, standing before the God of heaven, asking Him to accomplish what only He can ... and then being willing to let Him use us as the answer to our own prayers.

And so we pray:

"God, raise up families to embrace the orphan ... and find my heart willing before You to be one of those families should you call me to it."

"God, give revelation of Your Father's heart to a fatherless generation ... and shine through me, make me a witness, that this is who You are."

"God, bring healing to these broken ones ... and use even me as an instrument of Your healing."

Jon and I want to ask you to join us in 40 weeks of prayer for America's orphaned and fatherless.

We are not a big ministry organizing a large prayer event. We are just a couple of people who love the Father's heart, who love to pray and who believe that prayer can shift things.

We want to engage with God's heart, and let Him—the God who

has joined His name to these children, the God who has called Himself a Father to the fatherless—draw us into His burden and tell us how He feels over an orphaned generation of children.

So how are we, scattered across the Internet, going to do this in unity? It's simple:

- **Each week I will be sending out a point of focus for our prayers.** Come find me on Instagram or the new Facebook public page to see our prayer focuses *every Tuesday, beginning March 29.* Pray in your secret place with the Lord, pray as a family, pray with friends—however you want to pray, let's just pray. Let's truly engage with God's heart over these children.
- **Also, join in with Jon and me each Friday at 10 a.m. (CST) during our weekly prayer meeting for the fatherless.** Understandably, you might not be able to join us for each one, but take part as often as you can (via live stream or archives).

We are going to link arms and pray for a generation suffering under fatherlessness, to stand as their intercessors, to be a voice for these who have no voice.

We're going to ask God to set lonely into families, to break cycles of brokenness, to turn hearts of fathers back to children, to bring salvation in the foster system, to pour out abundant strength to families who are bringing children into their homes.

We're going to ask for the amazing and impossible and miraculous.

And who knows what will happen in these 40 weeks—in the lives of children, and in our own hearts as their intercessors.

Join us.

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When We Let the Father Name Us

It was just my second time to be with her.

Her history, all nine years of it, was tainted with stories we'd rather not believe.

Now she was orphaned and alone, and the oppression of her years hung over her, pressing her with a ruthless and heavy hand.

Her pain had forged her identity.

She had no father to name her. So instead, her abrasive history told her who she was.

That day, I'd come to visit her in the children's home where she lived. I looked into empty eyes that both told and hid a story. Eyes that held fear and insecurity and despair and pain.

I pulled out my bag where I'd put pictures, tape and a paper with her name typed on it with big, bold letters.

"So I looked up what your name means, just like I told you I would the last time we were together," I said to her.

Her eyes were suddenly at attention. "What does it mean? *Is it something bad?*" she asked apprehensively.

Her excited curiosity mingled with hesitation. People who hadn't been able to love her well had spoken many names over her through the years. And harsh circumstances had pinned her as an unwanted orphan.

And now, it was hard for her to imagine that a good definition could be ever attached to her.

"Oh no. It means something really good. It's perfect for you, actually. **Your name means PURE and BEAUTIFUL,**" I said to her.

An almost embarrassed smile spread across her face. "My name means ... *that?*" She couldn't quite bring herself to say those two words yet.

"Yep. I looked in several different books and searched the Internet. It's the truth, girl. Your name means *pure* and *beautiful*, and there's no gettin' around it."

For the next 45 minutes, we made a collage of her name, finding pictures of things that were "pure and beautiful" and taping them to a large poster board. She rummaged through magazine clippings, pulling out shots of waterfalls, sunsets, flowers and oceans. She commented on each one as she chose it, saying things like, "Oh that's *really* beautiful ... we should definitely use that one."

In the center of her collage, she taped her name and then wrote the words *pure* and *beautiful* next to it.

The initial embarrassment that had crept into her eyes started turning to joy, and a little bit of confidence sneaked in. The names that others (and she) had pinned to her heart in past years were being called into question.

And the door of her heart cracked open, even a little—and *Truth began to speak a new name.*

I have something in common with that girl.

I think maybe we all do.

Lots of thoughts run through my mind every day, so normal to my human mode that I hardly realize I'm really thinking about anything.

Our minds run *constantly* with words and names and daydreams and to-do lists.

And some of those thoughts that pass through our minds are about *us*. Sometimes they're whispers, and sometimes they're declared with large, bold letters. Thoughts like "failure" or "lazy" or "burdensome" or "hopeless" or "unseen" or "too much" or "not enough" lash the heart.

And *devastatingly*, these toxic thoughts sometimes feel normal. And so we drink them in.

I remember days of hanging my head low, walking my college campus, truly believing that my beauty was measured by the numbers that appeared on the scale when I stepped onto it each morning.

I've known too well, too many days of feeling mostly like God was disappointed in me, feeling like He was angry, feeling like I'd failed Him. Again.

As a wife, with a mountain-sized pile of laundry (and there are only two of us in this house) waiting for me to fold it, and out of ideas of what to cook for dinner, and sadly having said those words that I know hurt his heart—sometimes I want to grovel in thoughts of "He deserves so much better."

Truth is, I—we—tend to see our weaknesses as our blaring attributes. And subtly, we let them define us. We wear them like name tags pinned to our hearts while still trying to keep everything looking neat on the outside.

But people, do we *really* know who we are? Where did those names we've attached to ourselves come from?

Are those God's thoughts? Or mine? Or the devil's? Or the world's?

We're in a war, friends. We have an accuser, and sometimes he comes with a disguised voice, a voice that we maybe even think is our own. A voice that sounds so believable.

But we've got to break away from the auto-file our minds thumb through, the normalcy of believing anything other than *the truth—that we are cherished, beautiful and beloved.*

We've got to reach for—and fight for—our true name *in Him.* We've got to fight for our hearts and expose every lie.

And it happens when we take every thought, and every name, **captive**—holding them under the weight of God's Word ... *to see if they can still hold up.*

What are we letting define us? Or maybe better said, *who* are we letting define us?

We've got to ask: **What has the Father named me?**

What do You see, Father? What do You feel when you look at me?

Identify me.

Name me.

His Word is the final Word. And the name He gives us is our *true name.*

And He has called us clean.

He has called us beloved.

He has called us no longer orphans, but His own.

He has called us wanted.

He has called us worth dying for.

He has called us beautiful.

And we have to stare at these truths, have to ingest them, have to pray them over our tattered hearts, have to let them soak into our beings ... so that the truth of His Word, His names for us and His love over us become what define us through and through.

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What You Need in Your Wilderness

I'm on my seventh day of bed rest as I write this.

Did you know that you could seriously injure a rib, perhaps even crack a bone or tear a muscle ... from coughing? Not to scare you. I've had plenty of colds and viruses over nearly 33 years of life, but *this* has never happened. So I think it's a pretty rare thing. But truth be told, it's had its excruciating moments.

So I know you're wondering what one does for seven days in bed, right? I wish I could tell you, but really, I don't even know where the time went. Over the first few days, the mix of pain and pain meds was so nauseating I couldn't read or write. So mostly I think I had a week of just staring at the ceiling, lost in thought and aiming to pray.

But I'm not here to tell you a sad story about a hurt rib.

What I want to tell you is that in all of that “thinking time” I got, there was one thought that was the loudest and clearest and most repetitive. It was not a new thought. In fact, it was a thought that is more or less shrouded in familiarity. One I’ve heard so, so many times from Scripture and sermons and church small-group conversations.

But as the thought has been stirring in my heart for the last few months, (and as I lay on my bed icing my ribs as though it were my full-time job—because that week, it was), it has shed its familiarity.

It is the thought, or rather the call, to abide in Christ. Not just as a biblical idea, but as an if-I-don’t-do-this-I’m-going-to-die-inside necessity.

The days right after my injury, I found myself in bed staring at the ceiling, with tears coming down the sides of my face, not only because of the present physical pain, but also with the pains of the last few years filing through my mind, all running together in those moments of bedriddenness and ice packs and pain pills.

My mind went back to those months, years ago now, when I prayed with tears and guttural cries for the healing of a dear friend’s marriage. And then I remembered the day the divorce papers were served.

I remembered sleepless nights, my husband pacing the bedroom floor in prayer, as I lay in bed with another night of pain. I remembered doctor’s visits and a year of tedious physical therapy.

I remembered walking the back lawn of the White House at a prayer event in D.C., asking God to reign over my heart, and to reign over my nation. And then I remembered being in the hallway of our hotel later that night, on our way to the ER, being sicker than I’d ever been in my life, so desperate for relief that I was willing to be hooked up to a machine if it

would just make me feel better—and suddenly, right there by the hotel elevator, Jesus broke in, and my body and stomach settled.

I remembered looking across the kitchen table as my dad told me he had stage IV cancer. I remembered it not feeling real, not being able to wrap my mind around it, not knowing how to take away my dad's suffering—and feeling desperately helpless.

I remembered the most horrific phone call I'd ever received, three weeks after being with my dad at the kitchen table. I remembered pulling a dress out of my closet with shaking hands, and then driving eight hours to the unimaginable to attend my dad's memorial service.

It rips my soul to even write these things. And I'm not here to just tell you all my trials. But I know that I'm not the only one who's been through a season of suffering. Some of you have, some of you will. All of us will in time—be it in our own lives, or in our nation or world that feels as though it's in utter chaos.

And we have got to get into a life-habit of abiding, of living in the presence of God. The message that God has shouted to my heart in these last seven days of staring at the ceiling isn't just for me.

It's for all of us.

We have to abide in Christ. No matter the season. With a desperate, resolute, if-we-don't-do-this-we're-going-to-die-inside kind of tenacity.

Because truth is, if we don't abide in His life, we really will die within.

Sometimes, as our feet trod along life's landscape, we hit some dreadfully dry spots. We feel all kinds of hurts—hurt in our bodies, hurt in our hearts, hurt caused by other people.

And we feel shriveled and broken, desperate for water. To add to our trouble, we feel like we don't even know how to get to the spring.

And the temptation, for all of us, is to set our eyes on the dryness of today and so forget that we have a stream of Living Water, right inside of us.

And we've got to learn to drink, learn to practice His presence, learn to connect with God—even when our lives feel totally crazy.

If we keep our eyes on the Shepherd, He'll lead us to the waters, just in time.

Our security doesn't come from being out of the valley and on top of the mountain. **Security is being in the Shepherd's hand, wherever He is.** *Our refuge is remaining in His love, abiding in His presence, clinging to His faithfulness.*

The very lifeline of our souls is found in abiding in Life's source.

In essence, here's what I'm saying ... *just **keep talking to Him. Don't ever stop talking to Him.***

Keep looking at Him with your heart's eyes. Live *all* of life—the ups and downs, the griefs and joys, the valleys and mountains—with your eyes looking into His.

When the temptation is to check out and to “pray later,” let your voice, even your sighs and weeping, come into His ear.

Because without Him, we die. He is our Bread and Water, and we must make His Name, His Word, food for our souls.

I need something more than good words or good thoughts or good ideas for a blog post or sermon. Lord, help me. I need substance for my soul. Something to keep me alive on the inside, something able to reach beyond my surface and into my

core.

Whatever our season, we have to find Him in it. As humans we tend to live under this mindset that “It will be easier to seek God when”

“It will be easier when the grief lifts. It will be easier when the pain subsides. It will be easier when my schedule isn’t so crazy.”

But, reader, there will always be a distraction. *Always.* Good things, hard things, bad things ... there will be something that makes it seem like “another time” for wholehearted God-seeking will be better than the present time.

But there is not going to be a better time. Now is our hearts’ hour for whole, nothing withheld, if-I-don’t-do-this-I’m-going-to-die-inside tenacious pursuit of the holy.

If you’re weary, offer your wearied prayer. If you’re aching, sing Him a song from a broken heart. If you’re weeping, weep before Him. If your life feels crazy, ask Him to help you engage with His heart right in the midst of the craziness.

Whether you’re grieving or celebrating or staring at the ceiling holding an icepack and wondering what in the world is going on, *just abide in, live in and breathe in His presence.*

For only He who creates life, who gives life, who is Life, can keep us alive on the inside.

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