

WHAT WOMEN FEAR

WALKING *in* FAITH *that* TRANSFORMS

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INTRODUCTION

DID HE REALLY SAY THAT?

THE QUESTION THAT STARTED THE QUESTIONS

I have long been fascinated by the questions God asks in Scripture. It's obvious He knows the answers, so why does He ask? We see this throughout the Old Testament as well as the New, and it is such a beautiful image of the way Christ loves us. He gives opportunity after opportunity for us to share what's on our hearts with Him.

As I read, I noticed that many times He responded to someone who appeared to be struggling with fear by asking a question of them. And I also noticed that at first glance they seemed like kind of strange questions. I mean, the disciples are clinging to life in a boat that's being thrown around the ocean and the best He

can do is ask them where their faith is? Seriously? Or when He's wrestling Jacob, who is fearful about facing off with his brother the next day, and God asks him what his name is. Doesn't He know his name? I mean, He's God, right?

Of course He knows Jacob's name, just like He knows yours and mine. What He wants from this interaction is a confession of sorts; an acknowledgment of who Jacob is in his own eyes.

Scripture repeatedly shows us how God uses questions to reveal something about the heart of the person He is speaking to. Each question was for their benefit so they could be aware of a lesson He was teaching them. There is accountability and forced recognition of the words we have in response to these questions, and I believe there is great wisdom to be gained by considering them.

Interestingly, the very first question posed in the Bible is not spoken by God, but rather by Satan himself disguised as a snake. It is a simple, profound sentence that changes everything.

We learn that Satan doesn't have to force us to do anything sinful; he merely needs to plant a seed of doubt and let us tangle ourselves up in it. What he does in the Garden of Eden is introduce a concept that haunts each and every one of us every day of our lives.

Adam and Eve have been told not to eat fruit from one particular tree and they don't seem to be too concerned about that prohibition until the snake makes a casual comment.

"Did God *really* say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1, italics mine).

Did He? Because I'm wondering if you're sure you heard Him right. Maybe there's a little room for negotiation, Eve. I mean, it could have been a misunderstanding, right?

Eve responds by saying, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the

tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die” (Genesis 3:2–3 ESV).

Reading this makes me think of my daughter Ellie, who is a strict rule-keeper. What makes me smile in both instances is the immediate desire to defend the rules. It’s entirely possible that God told Eve not to touch the tree, but we don’t see that anywhere in Scripture. He tells her not to *eat* from it, but He never says anything about *touching* it. Maybe like my Ellie she had put up a little extra protection in her mind so she wouldn’t break the eating rule.

But, in the event that she thought she had misunderstood . . . now *that* would be different . . .

Satan doesn’t miss a beat. He has planted the seed of doubt in her mind and then he goes in for the kill.

Okay, so you want to keep the rules. Fine. But do you know why He doesn’t want you to eat? Because you could be wise like He is, and He doesn’t want that. You won’t die, you’ll just be a little more like God.

Well, that does it. Eve grabs herself some fruit and then offers a bit to her husband.

I like to imagine the conversation that happened before the fig leaves were added to wardrobe.

“Eve! What are you thinking? God told us we can’t eat that stuff!”

“Adam, it’s *fiiiiine*. I just met the nicest talking snake and he assured me there was a little confusion about that. We aren’t going to die, we’re going to get wiser!”

Adam sure doesn’t stick up for the old rulebook. He dives right in without any apparent rebuttal, and immediately everything changes—not just for them, but for all of us.

Never once did Satan tell her to eat the fruit; all he did was ask her if she was sure.

And then I think she wondered if God really had her best interest in mind.

We aren't so different, are we?

At this point, sin enters the world, and fear comes right along with it. As Adam and Eve sew up their new loincloths, they know they have made a mistake and that they are going to be in trouble.

They act out of fear, and so do we. We do it in all kinds of ways, and while it's different for each person, the heart of it is the same. We are responding to the lie of Satan each and every time we run. Fundamentally, every single fear comes from the lie spoken by the enemy in a garden designed to be a haven: *Are you sure? Are you really, really sure? Because you are staking your life on a claim that you might have just misunderstood. God says He is good . . . is He? He tells you He has your best in mind . . . does He? He boasts that He is almighty, all-knowing, all together trustworthy . . . is He?*

What a powerful way to get us to fall into the trap. He doesn't quite push us in, but he doesn't have to. We do a pretty good job of jumping once the doubt is there. For the remainder of this book, I want to encourage you to change your thinking about fear. Instead of it being a black and white, you do or you don't, you succeed or you fail kind of issue, I want to propose that it is more of a balancing act than anything else. I don't think I'm a failure because I have had fears, and I certainly don't think that it is a requirement for Christians to forego fear in order to be good followers of Christ. I believe fear is the natural response to the question Satan whispered, and I find that every day I have to adjust my footing consciously to move toward Jesus.

In my mind's eye I see a woman teetering on a tightrope, holding a long pole as she tries to balance herself in light of the truth of God. It takes concentration, it takes work, and it takes a whole lot of faith. Some of us are currently tipped so far in the wrong direction that we don't know if we will be able to right

ourselves, and others are walking with arms outstretched while their feet confidently move one in front of the other. As life goes on, we will probably experience both, and what we will find is that it is always changing. Situations come up and cause us to tip a little, and we cry out in fear. We often feel like just as we get it figured out, the wire begins to shake and we have to adjust it all over again.

We (mistakenly) believe that at some point we are going to find the solution, learn how to balance the pole exactly right in every moment so that we don't ever tremble anymore. We think we can overcome it so that it never rears its head again, and that the rest of our days will be smooth sailing. I don't believe there is such a thing, and the more we focus our attention on the rope, the less we focus on the pole in our hands. It isn't like there is one solution that will erase all our fears, one way to do it, one single thing that will take it away and make it simple. That's not how God designed us.

I have heard it said that God is like the net in this example; that He will catch us if we fall, that He is our safe place, that we need not fear because we always have that waiting if things get bad enough. I don't disagree, but I think that many of us have put our emphasis on the net rather than the pole in our hands. We have access to Him here, in the moment, in every situation that arises. The more we tap into a life balanced by Christ, grounded in knowing Him and His Word, the less we have to worry about falling off. It's still scary up here, no question, but if we can get a firm grip on that which steadies us, it will look different.

Have you been living life with Jesus as the net? I know for many seasons of life, I have. He's there if I really need Him, but at this moment I just need to figure out how to get myself straightened and keep moving.

Balance. I think it's more about that than anything else. What are we depending on when we start to tip? How do we

develop the kind of thinking that steadies us? Why do we react the way we do when the rope shakes and the wind comes from nowhere? We all want to live lives that rely on the power of Christ, but we don't necessarily know how to get to the point where we are doing that. My prayer is that as we work through some of the major categories of fear and dig deep into our own experiences, we will see that there are patterns in our thinking that have thrown us off balance. As I read through Scripture I was so blessed by studying the questions God asks in His Word, and doubly blessed at the responses of His servants. Daily now, I hear those questions at the heart of my fears, and before I am tempted to believe I am never going to take another step, I answer them in my heart and with my actions. I am better prepared when life comes at me and I rely on armor I never turned to before.

What did they fear? What did He ask? How did they answer?

How do we?

Let's dig in with God's question to Adam and Eve, shall we? Okay, back to the garden we go . . .

Genesis tells us that they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden and they immediately hid. Here's where God's first recorded question occurs.

"Where are you?" He called out.

In the event that you're curious, God knew where they were. Although it would have certainly been noteworthy if He were really asking for the sake of determining their location, like He had lost the first two people He ever made. *Oh well, back to the drawing board. Maybe next time . . .*

Although we can never truly know the mind and motives of God, I suspect that He asked the question because He wanted Adam and Eve to tell Him the answer, and in doing so, confess their transgression. He wasn't asking them to identify their location, but rather their *condition*. And maybe also to teach them that cowering behind trees doesn't really do that much

good when you're hiding from the God of the universe. Just a thought.

Adam responded, "I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself" (Genesis 3:10 ESV).

Where are you?

I was afraid, Lord. So I hid . . .



Santa was coming.

I knew it was true because the news had done a special weather update and it showed a fuzzy radar picture of his sleigh traveling around the world. My parents popped popcorn on the stove and we were glued to the TV. We had been counting down the days with a little tabletop calendar, and we were finally there. This was it.

I was fascinated by him.

Who could do that? The whole traveling thing wasn't nearly as interesting to me as the fact that he knew who was naughty. I mean, it was certainly logistically complicated to do all that in one night, and if weather patterns didn't cooperate or if the reindeer got antsy, well, there could be trouble.

Logically, yes. It could be complicated.

But who in the world knows every single move a kid makes and then decides whether or not they're going to get candy? Now that is some serious pressure.

Who has time for "Jingle Bells"? Who cares about chestnuts and where they're roasting? There were much more important things at stake. There was only one Christmas song I memorized as a four-year-old; the one it all boiled down to in the end.

"He's making a list, he's checkin' it twice. Gonna find out who's naughty and nice . . ."

Oh wow.

He's checking it *twice*.

Nothing gets by this guy.

My little sister arranged the cookies on the plate, taking a bite of each as she went. She had icing all over her face, so it was probably futile at this point, but in the event that the big guy was still making adjustments to his list, I did what any good sister would do. I whacked her arm and pointed up at the chimney while opening my eyes wide to remind her he was watching.

She dropped the cookie and cried.

My parents told me to knock it off. Clearly they were not concerned about her stocking this year.

Oh well. I tried.

For weeks it had been like this.

My mom would tell me to get my clothes on and I would run to my closet, thinking *he's watching, he's watching . . . hurry!*

I ate everything on my plate, including things that were green. I didn't even dare play with my dolls because I might make a mess and forget to clean it up. I brushed my teeth like my life depended on my dental hygiene.

I was tormented by all the Christmas decorations and the stores showing pictures of him all decked out in his suit, like there was a taunting clock counting down to judgment day. Everyone was so casual about it. Didn't they know he was even watching them sleep? He knew when they were awake! I figured I better just be good for goodness sake.

He sure acted like a nice guy when I told him what I wanted. He looked just like the pictures and he "Ho, ho, ho'ed" and told me he was going to feed his reindeer.

I wasn't fooled. He knew how bad I was and he was going to make me pay.

I can just imagine myself in line, smoothing down my black

velvet dress and assessing my competition as I threw in some last-minute prayers.

I'm willing to bet I tried to get Santa's attention when the kids started roughhousing next to me.

But there was always that nagging voice that had already found a home in so many of my thoughts—*what if?* It all came down to this, and we were going to sing happy songs and dress pretty and then just hope we made the big cut. And I for one was not unaware of the consequences of my sin.

Christmas morning wasn't for those who disobeyed and blamed the dog "falling" down the stairs on her sister. No way that had gotten past him.

I smiled for the obligatory "Christmas nightgown and cookies" picture and then I hightailed it up to my bedroom. For the record, I still have this picture and I look like I'm drugged. Apparently fear did strange things to my face. The horrific bowl haircut (thank you, Mother) was totally unrelated but equally disturbing.

I hopped into bed and pulled the covers up to my neck. I stared at the two plastic candles my mom had taped down on the windowsill with masking tape. It was so quiet in my room, and I squeezed my eyes shut so I could focus on talking to him.

"Santa, I know you've been watching. And if you want to wake me up when you get here, I can explain about the dog thing." I cleared my throat and continued on explaining all the mistakes that came to mind.

It was my first attempt at confession. And naturally, it was to a fictitious man who flew reindeer. Welcome to my world.

"What if I haven't been good enough?" I whispered.

Tears started spilling down my cheeks and I rolled over in my bed and pulled the covers over me.

He can't see me in here, I thought. I'm safe . . .

And there, on December 24, 1980, I learned what it felt like to try and hide from the One Who was always watching.

Early in the morning, I heard my sister Jennifer rustling around. I could hear paper tearing and squeals coming from the family room.

I didn't budge. My nightgown was soaked through with sweat and I realized it was judgment time.

A few more minutes went by and I heard my door creak open. My dad came and sat next to me on the bed.

"Angela, your sister is already up and she's ripping through her presents. You want to join us?" He stroked my hair and smiled.

I burst into fresh tears, agonizing over what I should say. My dad still loved me, at least for the moment. But I had a feeling that might change when he saw the lump of coal waiting for me down the hall. Everyone was going to see it eventually so I might as well beat Santa to the punch and try for some Brownie points.

"Daddy, I'm a bad girl! He didn't bring me anything because I'm bad and he knows it! I'm not going out there, ever. EVER!!!!"

I started to pull the covers up again but my dad grabbed them from me.

"Honey, no! You're wrong! I've been in there and I saw what he brought and I really think you should go look. He brought you something you really wanted." He smiled expectantly and for a moment I was tempted to believe him.

I searched his eyes and considered the two quarters I had stolen from the money dish in the kitchen a few days prior.

Not a chance, pops.

"You're *LYING*!!!! You're trying to trick me and I'm not going out there!!!!" This time I managed to fully disappear under the Holly Hobbie sheets. I was gasping for air now, terrified.

He stayed with me until I relented, but it wasn't without a fight. As I recall, he ended up carrying me to the family room while I stared over his shoulder instead of looking ahead. I made

him tell me again that he saw toys for me when we got close, and when he assured me several more times I opened my eyes.

I will never forget the moment I looked for myself and saw that it was true. Santa had brought me pom-poms. The green and white pom-poms I wanted. This was monumental, not so much because it was what I was hoping for, but something much bigger than that. Something that would shape my thought process for the rest of my life.

He thought I was good enough. Maybe I don't need to be afraid of him anymore.

I danced around the house singing Christmas carols and jingling the bells on my Christmas sweater. Nothing could be better. I didn't care about the candy canes; I just wanted to be deemed *good*.

I didn't want to be in trouble with him, so I had hidden.

I might as well have chosen to cower under a couple trees.

To this day this is one of my parent's favorite stories to tell, and as I flip through photo albums and see the look on my face as I held the Barbie car in front of me for 300 million pictures, I can see the joy of a little girl whose innocence was intact and whose heart believed. But for me, part of the believing was fear.

He was checking it twice, after all.



When I think back to my childhood, there is so much joy and love. Despite this, there is a haunting feeling of fear I carried with me into adulthood. My parents did everything they could to help me, but to this day fear is a major part of my testimony. I won't say I feel qualified to tell you I have all the answers, nor will I promise that you will miraculously be cured of your anxiety by the time you reach the end of this book. What I will say is that I hope I am an encouraging companion to you as we go; a sister

who understands your pain and the desire to live a life free of it. As I wrote this book I prayed for each person who would read it, asking God to make Himself known in a special way to those of you who are in bondage to fear.

I am also praying for those of you who are reading and wouldn't necessarily say you are fearful. I hope that some of the chapters will inspire you to be honest about parts of your life that you might not have put under the header of "fear." I truly believe that every single one of us struggles with some type of fear, whether it's fear of flying or fear of being "found out." Maybe you don't worry about dying but you get sick thinking about the fact that you might fail.

Throughout Scripture we have the opportunity to meet some amazing men and women whose stories remind us that we aren't alone, and that our fears and struggles are not unknown to God. I know that for good portions of this book I saw things I had never seen, and I believe the Lord opened my eyes to verses I had skimmed over many times, never fully grasping the magnitude of what was being offered.

I want you to hear my heart on this. I am not going to beat you over the head with a five-pound Bible and tell you that if you truly loved the Lord you would never fear. I don't think that's realistic. Yes, the Lord desires for you to be free from the bondage of fear, but it isn't reasonable to say you will never have fear again in your life if you are a good Christian. I have had people make me feel this way, probably without even knowing, and it hurt me deeply.

I have found so much comfort in the company of amazing men and women scattered from Genesis to Revelation who have given me hope that I don't have to do it alone. More than that, these people from the pages of the Bible have become friends to me over the years. I look to them for advice on how other people have dealt with true, human emotions. Some of them failed

miserably. Honestly, that kind of takes the pressure off feeling like I might be the first one to simultaneously love God and feel like I'm disappointing Him.

Several years ago I was in a Bible study of amazing women; each and every one was someone I respected and trusted. One night a woman in study shared that she was terrified that something bad was going to happen to her. She started crying as she told us about horrific images that had tormented her. As she spoke I noticed that almost every single person was offering their version of what she had just said. Here we had been meeting for years and this had never come up. It was like the floodgates opened as a group of women sat side by side and shared things they had carried for decades because they thought nobody would understand. As I recall, there was only one girl who didn't say anything, and I'm pretty sure that was because she feared public speaking.

We have a very real enemy who thrives on our silence.

He doesn't want us to be in fellowship, sharing our hearts and seeking wisdom on how to live lives that glorify God in spite of the darkness we feel. I can honestly say I'm not sure I have ever felt spiritual battle as keenly as I did when I wrote these words. My prayer, and not just for myself, is that we will emerge as women who can say we trust our God fully and we are devoted to seeking Him in the midst of the fear.

As we work our way through different types of fears, I'll introduce you to some familiar and some not-so-familiar faces in the hopes that you might see a glimpse of yourself.

In the past few years I have had to come face to face with my greatest fears, and while I can't say it hasn't been incredibly hard, I can say this:

I believe Him, and I'm still standing.

Coming through some of my worst nightmares has given me an opportunity to trust Him in a way I have never needed to, and that solace walks me through the shadows day after day. My

prayer is that you will reach the end of this book and you will be reminded that you have a God who is not unaware of anything you fear. He doesn't mock you for it, and you don't get a failing grade because you have moments of doubt.

I hope you won't lie in bed wondering if you've been "good enough" anymore. You won't think your name is going to show up on the naughty list and you are going to be ridiculed for the gaps in your character.

All that to say, my deepest longing is for you to run after tomorrow like there is something waiting there for you, possible through the kind of love that sees past our fear.

And who knows?

You might just get pom-poms and a new hairstyle if you brave the hallway.

God, be with us as we journey together through our fears. Bless us with understanding, with peace, and with the wisdom to seek Your face when we start to lose our footing. Bless those who are reading with exactly what they need to take from these chapters, and inspire them to start moving toward a life that is filled with the mercy that satisfies our souls.

CHAPTER 1

SITTING BY THE WELL

FEAR OF THE “WHAT IF . . .”

By all accounts, she had done what she was supposed to do.

Hagar had conceived a son with Abraham at his wife Sarah’s urging. Sarah believed that the only way to keep her husband’s legacy alive was to have a maidservant become impregnated, and she told Abraham her plan. He went along with it, despite the fact that God had given him a promise that didn’t include another woman.

Apparently God’s plan wasn’t materializing the way Sarah had expected it would, so she took matters into her own hands.

It’s what we do when we fear, isn’t it?

We grab a hold of it and shake our will into the corners that don’t make sense.

Here's a conversation I have had with the Lord in about a million different ways over the years: "I heard You say that, God, but it seems like maybe You have forgotten that You did. It seems like maybe I need to do this in order for it to all fall into place, so I'm going to move on ahead of You and You can catch up to me at the next stop. Sound good?"

Many times I have done this in such subtle ways that it wasn't until much later that I was convicted of my own prodding and intervening. Underneath it all is the voice of Satan, wishing I would keep worrying, keep striving, keep manipulating everything I can get my hands on.

Sarah's plan didn't go exactly the way she hoped it would, and years later she found herself pregnant with a son and very jealous of the woman she had arranged to bear her husband's first son. So even after both Sarah and Abraham had acted out of fear and disbelief, God fulfilled his promise and gave them a son, Isaac. During a feast in celebration of Isaac, she sees Hagar's son Ishmael laughing, and that's it. She tells Abraham it's time for Hagar to hit the road with her son.

I am reminded often of the pains I have taken in my life to "help" God, and I imagine you can think of those times as well. We want to trust Him and we do to a certain extent. But then come those times when the world isn't making sense and we lean on our own strength as our minds wrestle with the question that drives the fear.

Where are You in this, God?

I believe that was Sarah's heart-question when she urged her husband to proceed with Hagar, and the great agony that followed must have left her broken.

I should have listened, God. I should have trusted You even when I couldn't see Your hand in my life . . . now look at this mess I've made . . .

All the times I have read this story in Genesis, I have seen

myself in Sarah; I get tangled up in my own plans and then I hit a breaking point. The one I never paid as much attention to was Hagar. As I reread the passage recently I was mesmerized by this woman and her story. I spent quite a bit of time walking with her in her trials and I came away with a gift from the Lord which I pray will bless you as well if you have ever walked in the fear of the “*what if*. . .”



I have very detailed memories of being hospitalized for anxiety as a child. As early as two or three years old, I began to worry about things that children need not worry about. I would insist that my father walk me around the house when it was time for bed so that I could check to make sure the front door was locked, the stove was turned off, that my baby sister was breathing, etc. I was tormented, even then, by thoughts of what could happen to them if I wasn't vigilant. It grew worse as the months passed and my parents decided it would be a good idea for me to see a psychologist. Every week I had an appointment with a very nice lady and she asked me to draw certain pictures and then she would ask me to describe them.

I was a pretty smart kid, so I realized by the second week that she was way more interested in the ones where I looked sad and everyone else looked happy. I was already a people-pleaser so I knocked myself out.

She thought it was a window into my soul but the truth was if I made myself out to be an unhappy kid, my parents took me out to Mexican instead of Burger King.

We would sit in the big booth, them across from me, and discuss what had happened in the session that day. I would dip chips into salsa and tell them that she gave me crayons and I drew a picture of myself on the outside of the house instead of the inside

with them. We placed our order and I went into detail about how “stick figure” Angela was running away and I had a sad face but everyone else in my family had a happy face.

“Why do you feel that way, hon?” My mother sipped her Coke, trying to figure out what she had done wrong.

Meanwhile I was convinced that if I could keep the conversation going through chimichangas, I was pretty much guaranteeing a shot at Mexican ice cream.

As much as I loved the attention, I’m not sure those early therapy sessions really did much other than give me a love for tacos and one-on-one time with my mom and dad. I specifically remember thinking it was silly to go in and draw pictures, because that was all make-believe. What I feared was *real*. And there wasn’t anything that lady could do about those fears. The drawings were just drawings. In real life, lots of things could go wrong.

I would quiz my dad on what he would do if someone broke into our house in the middle of the night. We would go through all of these different scenarios to make me feel safe and then eventually I would fall asleep from the exhaustion of worry. I remember asking him to pick up some things around the house so I could judge how strong he was. He must have passed the test because eventually I asked him if he would be able to rip the toilet out of the bathroom floor if he needed to and he told me he didn’t think it would get to that. I remember not being satisfied with that response, but I’m still not sure how the toilet came into the picture in the first place.

The fear didn’t resolve itself with time, and when I was five or six, my parents decided I needed to be hospitalized. The room was small, with a little TV hanging from the corner and a dresser by the bed. The bed went up and down, which was my only entertainment when my mother stepped out to make phone calls. I pretended I was in the chair that they pumped up to cut my mom’s hair at the beauty parlor, and then I acted like it was a

roller coaster. It kept my thoughts busy for a little while but they always circled back around to the fact that I was still in a hospital bed. They did a lot of tests and fed me a lot of Popsicles while I was there, and although I don't know if I received an actual diagnosis, the consensus was that I started to develop an ulcer and my worrying was very severe and abnormal.

I hated being there. The worst part was being in the room alone. I would climb down off the big bed and tiptoe to the door, cracking it wide enough to look down the hallways and make sure nobody was looking. Then I would slide along the wall as quietly as I could until I was right up against the yellow line. The yellow line was a piece of tape that stretched across the hallway and was the boundary line for kids. We couldn't go past it in any circumstance, and being the rule-keeper I was, it never crossed my mind to step across it. I would get as close as I could, my toes pressed up against it, and listen for my mother's voice. I would hear her making phone calls from the pay phone, talking and crying as she shared what was going on with me. I fell asleep there on more than one occasion, and was carried back to my starched white bed sheets by one of the nurses.

They tried to comfort me but nothing was going to calm me down until my mother got back, so I made up counting games and stared at the flickering lights that danced around the room from the static on the TV.

I can see that little girl in my mind, too small to even tuck herself into bed, and I weep for the parts of childhood she missed. It's not that I didn't have a happy childhood, because by all accounts it was ideal. It's just that I couldn't let myself do anything fully, without abandon, the way a child should. There was too much at stake, even then. I had to be in charge or everything would fall apart.

One of the things that was the most difficult for me during that time was being away from my parents. I feared that

something would happen and that I wouldn't be there to prevent it. Right before I began my second grade year, my father got a new job and we were relocated to Kobe, Japan. We lived in a hotel for several months as we house-hunted, and I have such fond memories of my mother humming and putting on her Oil of Olay cream. I would lay on my stomach, legs bent, feet dancing in the air while I asked her to describe each of the steps in her beauty ritual.

She was beautiful to me, but more urgently, she was fragile.

After a few weeks, it was time for me to start school. I threw up for several days in a row as the big red X's counted down the squares on the calendar. When the day finally came for me to start, I got into a taxicab with my mother and my sister and we started the half-hour drive to my new school. I sobbed the whole way, clutching her soft hands and begging her to let me go back to the hotel with her. I will never forget pulling up to the huge school, kids and chaos everywhere.

My sister kissed my mom and jumped out of the car to meet some new friends and her kindergarten teacher. I, on the other hand, wouldn't let go of the car handle, and I shook with fear.

She started to cry.

"Please, Mommy. Don't leave me. Don't leave me here. If something happens . . ." I buried my head in her lap and clutched the hem of her skirt.

"Sweetie, everyone goes to school. Look at your sister. She just ran over there and she's already laughing and playing with some new friends. There is nothing to be afraid of." Her fingers smelled like cigarettes and face powder.

I remember thinking that she was out of her mind for saying something like that. Nothing to be afraid of? Of course there were things to be afraid of. She could get hit by a car on the way home. She could get robbed in the hotel room. A plane could crash into her while she was crossing the street to fill her grocery cart.

Nothing to be afraid of? Ridiculous.

There's *everything* to be afraid of.

My fingers tightened as the possibilities grew larger than life in my head, and the panic took over as my legs started to kick. I told her I wasn't going to let go. The saddest part was that I wasn't necessarily afraid of what would happen to me while I played on the playground at school, but rather what would happen to mother in a taxicab without me. The responsibility I put on myself to keep those around me safe was already at a fevered pitch before I could read, and it wasn't going to change anytime soon.

After a few minutes, my mother motioned to the cab driver to go on back to the hotel. She told me that we were coming back the next day and that I would have to get out. She would keep me with her for one more day and that was it. I shook with relief, thanking her over and over again. I couldn't help but wonder if it was actually supposed to be the other way around; after all, I was protecting her.

As with all of the other fears I have dealt with in my life (and likely you in yours), the central issue is the feeling that you aren't in control. I guess that isn't really accurate—I should say it's the realization that you *aren't* in control.

For me, this has been especially hard in the area of protecting people I love from harm. I was certain as a seven-year-old that if I wasn't there, something bad could happen. And if it did, the responsibility would rest squarely on my shoulders for the rest of my life. That wasn't something I could live with.

Whenever I was invited to a sleepover, I would cry. I wanted to be friends with everyone and I knew they were going to have a ball, but it meant being away from my house for the night, which was unbearable. My parents always encouraged me to go, and assured me that they would come get me if I needed them to, even if it was the middle of the night. On a handful of occasions I gathered my pajamas, toothpaste, and a *Little House on the Prairie* book and

allowed my mother to drop me off. This was kind of a flop for a few reasons. Namely that I always ended up going home before midnight and also because I was a sixth grader with a penchant for Laura Ingalls when I should have been focused on playing “Light as a feather, stiff as a board.” Eventually word got around that I wasn’t worth inviting unless you needed a good laugh.

I was the ultimate party pooper, and although I developed mechanisms that helped me over the years, the fear didn’t go away. For the record, neither did my love of prairie life, which proved to be even more awkward as the years passed.

My father will tell you that even when I left for college I was haunted by what might happen in my absence. Over and over they would tell me they were fine, that everything was great, and that I didn’t need to miss out on college life because I was worried about them. A few months after I left home, my cousin was killed in a car accident. I hadn’t been close to him, but nonetheless I was rattled by his death, and all of the feelings I had tried to stuff down became overwhelming. See? It happened. It happened all around, and not just to other people. Now it was possible in my own family.

I went home for Christmas vacation and my parents knew I wasn’t doing well. At that point I saw a psychiatrist who thought medication was the best option. Unfortunately, this particular doctor wasn’t super concerned with dosage, and after several incidences of passing out and having seizures, I was checked into a hospital. They gradually weaned me off the medication, explaining that I was on about ten times the amount that I should be on for my height and weight. I was hospitalized for a week or so while they made sure I was stable, and then released me back into the environment that brought out my greatest fears.

This idea of “what if” looms larger than life for many of the women I know, and there are two sides to the “what if” coin that must be addressed to really recognize it as a stronghold.

The first is the idea that something might happen in the future, and the second is the fear that we made a poor decision in the past and life could have resulted differently.

Let's spend a little time talking about the latter as I'm sure some of these examples will resonate with you.

"What if I had listened to my instinct that the baby's movement had slowed down? Would she be here now?"

"What if I had stayed with my husband? Would my life be better?"

"What if I hadn't said those words? Would they have accepted me?"

"What if I had seen the signs that he wasn't doing well? Could I have prevented it?"

"What if I had stuck with graduate school? Would I have a better job?"

"What if I had been stronger in my convictions? Would I be stuck here now?"

I would hasten to say that very few days go by without each of us having a conversation with ourselves about "what might have been." It could be something as insignificant as wishing we had chosen a healthier breakfast, but the fact of the matter is we spend a huge portion of our lives looking back. This thinking can weigh us down with guilt, shame, regret, and fear.

I went to church with a dear woman who had lost a baby at 39 weeks gestation. She found me in the foyer after our church service, and through teary eyes, she told me that her son had died of a cord accident. It had been three years since the incident, but as she shared with me, she recalled the day before his death when she felt like his movement was different. Having already had two other children, she wasn't overly concerned about it and convinced herself he was just calm. By the next morning she was panicked. She went into the hospital, where she was told that her son was gone. She suffered through a full labor and delivery, only to hold

her beautiful stillborn son a few hours later. When she returned home, she sat in his nursery and wept while she wondered “what if?”

Even as she shared this with me, she asked the question again. It had haunted her for all these years, and had shaken her faith to the core. She was desperate to go back to the moment she first felt the concern and do it all differently. I’m sure her mind played every potential scenario in the coming months as she dealt with the loss. Her marriage and her parenting had fallen by the wayside as she had spiraled into the abyss of possibilities. With each passing Christmas and anniversary came the nagging voice, taunting her to imagine how it all would have been different if she had gone in one day sooner.

It is so easy to fear we have ruined something beautiful.

So easy for us to believe that we held the keys to what was supposed to be and now we are destined to live among the ashes that remain. And more often than we care to admit, we step back into a situation where we think we can redeem the past, only to find that we have no more peace than we did before. We are powerless in changing it, but paralyzed by the sense that we have tainted the great canvas of our lives.

Years ago I knew a girl who was married with three children. From the outside you would have thought she had it made, but underneath it all she wondered if she had chosen the right man. Before she had met her husband, someone else had broken her heart and she hadn’t ever really gotten over it. She ended up having an affair and leaving her husband because she longed to know what she might have missed.

She was so busy looking backwards that she bumped full-force into a future that was anything but what she wanted.

There is a difference in learning from past mistakes and ruminating over the million-and-one ways we might have done it

better. I speak from experience when I tell you that nothing good can be gained from such thinking.

Will you sit with me for just a moment and think about a situation in your life you wish you had handled differently? Several come to mind for me even as I am writing, and I am tempted to fret over my decisions. I can feel a sense of fear rising up in me, a sense of panic that I have done more damage than can be repaired.

I feel it in my bones, this curiosity about what might have been. If I allow myself to drift back there, I can spend many sleepless nights caught in a web of doubt. I believe that Satan preys on these moments, taunting us with our own self-doubt, rejoicing as we replay things over and over, desperate for a different outcome. Scripture gives us powerful words about these thoughts, and I encourage you to find strength in them when you begin to wonder.

“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (2 Corinthians 10:5)

We can't go back to the waiting room, to the friend's house, to the moment where the door slammed behind us. What we can do is go to the throne of grace with our regret and let Jesus redeem it as only He can. Take it captive before it takes you. As soon as the thought comes, make a conscious decision to set it at the foot of the cross, and make a commitment that you will leave it there. Will you always do it perfectly? Probably not. But you will develop the strength that comes from leaving the weight with Someone who is equipped to carry it. You weren't made to walk through life with the stack of missed opportunities pressing you into the ground. Unless it is a thought that will spur you on to good action in the future, it isn't worth allowing back in. Pray as you release this to God, asking to help you submit to His

authority and leadership as you move away from a life consumed with regret. In order to be released from the burden of sin in your past, make a point of repenting of it to the Lord as specifically as you are able.

I am someone who lives in a constant state of worry about the future, and it's something I have to commit to the Lord many times a day. I fear that He has somehow forgotten me and that I'm on my own. I take matters into my own hands but He reminds me that He hasn't gone anywhere. There is always a moment in time when I can feel His gentle voice reassuring me, but it's usually hindsight that brings relief instead of trust in the moment. I long to be a woman who walks in the moment God has given me, with full confidence in what's to come. I know it isn't always going to look the way I want it to, but I long to internalize the fact that He is never going to forsake me or take His hands off me.

Where are You, God?

Let's return to Hagar for a moment as we consider the ways we struggle through this fear.



She ran until she couldn't run anymore and then she fell to the ground in defeat.

She had been given a few things from Abraham as he sent her on her way but now she was face-to-face with the reality that she couldn't feed her son. She was desperate and alone, and I imagine she wondered why God would put her through all of this just to end up alone in the desert, watching her boy suffer. Knowing that he was going to die, she placed him in a bush and walked a few steps away. She closed her eyes, unable to witness the death of her only son as he starved.

God hears the boy crying out and an angel of the Lord spoke to her, saying, "What is the matter, Hagar?" (Genesis 21:17).

I'm going to go out on a limb and say He knew what was the matter.

The angel proceeds to tell her not to be afraid and that the Lord had heard her son crying.

Where are You, God?

His answer, gentle as rain, falls upon her.

I have heard him. I am here.

He allowed Hagar a glimpse of her son's future in that moment, and while we don't always have that benefit, we do have the voice that says "I have heard you." Sometimes we hear it more clearly than others, but it is there always.

I must have read this story dozens of times without recognizing the power of what happens next. Scripture tells us that God opens Hagar's eyes and she sees a well of water. Well that's handy. Wonder how in the world she missed that?

Take note of the fact that it *doesn't* say He dropped a well of water right next to her, but rather that He opened her eyes to see it.

Her circumstances didn't change.

Her awareness did.

I have read before that the Hebrew word for "sight" is very similar to the word for "fear," and it finally dawned on me.¹

In her state of panic, I can imagine that she closed her eyes and made herself blind to whatever the Lord had in store for her. I recognize this same behavior in myself; I become convinced that the worst-case scenario is upon me and I better just give up. Not only do I surrender to it, I become an active participant in my own "worst-case scenario" as I cower behind a rock and anticipate the end.

This hit me like a ton of bricks. Such a simple sentence and yet it breathes life into me as I consider it. I hope it will do the same for you.

Hagar sat in full anticipation of her son's death, and instead of looking to what God had given her, she surrendered to the fear.

Is it possible that the well is right beside you but you haven't seen it because your head is hung in grief? Are you so focused on what you think is missing that you don't see what is present? Maybe you need to ask the Lord to illuminate what it is He wants you to see. It's possible that what you have seen as the end of the road is actually an opportunity to open your eyes and see something you haven't.

I don't want to walk through this life with my eyes closed, convinced that God has forgotten me. I have begun to pray against this, asking the Lord to open my eyes as I cower from a fate I have imposed on myself. I have so many friends who say the same, and I don't disagree that their circumstances feel grim. With many of their husbands out of work and so many unknowns, I understand the fear of not being able to see where God is working. It sounds glib of me to say that, unless you know that I have been in situations where I was sure I wouldn't be rescued and the helplessness nearly did me in. I speak not as one who has merely believed in the unlikely miracle for others, but rather as one who has drunk deep of the well herself. Things I never thought would bloom in that desert soil have been the most spectacular, life-changing moments of my life. I think it's also worth noting that I wasn't always nourished in the way I was expecting or wanting. Sometimes it comes in a form we don't recognize at the time. It's only in the looking back that we realize God's hand was in it. He provided for us when we thought we wouldn't see the light of day again.

It's hard to say I will never worry again, and you may feel the same way. Remember that the God of Hagar is still listening to our cries, despite evidence you may feel is to the contrary. When you find yourself in a situation that seems hopeless, remember the woman who mourned a son she wasn't going to lose. Remember the moment the Lord opened her eyes to see His provision, waiting there for her all the while.

Take heart, friend.

Drink deep of the faithfulness of God in the hopes that the next time you face insurmountable odds you won't cower in fear. You will learn to keep your eyes open to what God is doing, always confident that the Lord of Hagar loves you just as He loved her.



Lord, I believe You are the well-maker, but I also believe You are the eye-opener. I pray that each person reading these words will ask You to reveal Yourself in a personal and profound way, and that they will see hope in a place that was barren with fear. I pray that in every circumstance we will choose You over hopelessness, and that we will know even to the core of our being that You are working on our behalf. Let us remember to keep our eyes, our hearts, and our desires open to what You have in store for our lives. I pray our days will be filled with gratitude as You turn the unlikely into the obvious. Lord, we love You . . . unspeakably so. Thank You . . .

