

Unraveling Fairy Tales

Learning to Live Happily Ever After

Kim A. Larson

Unraveling Fairy Tales: Learning to Live Happily Ever After
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Introduction

Life rarely happens as planned. My dream of marrying a hometown boy and living on a farm near my parents never came true. Nor did having half a dozen children or being a stay-at-home mom. And, unfortunately, I still live three hundred miles from my hometown—the place and people I never intended to leave. College pulled me away, and falling in love kept me there. Even after my first marriage fizzled like a Fourth of July sparkler, I stayed put so my two boys could grow up near their father.

Though few of my previous dreams have come true, I can look back at life's disappointments, failures, and traumatic events and be grateful—because God is faithful. I'm learning to trust he works all things for good—one secret to living *happily ever after*. In addition, I'm learning that his dreams far exceed any I could imagine.

The Lord longs to reveal his heart to you so you'll know without a doubt he loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. More important, he wants you—all of you—just as you are. No words adequately describe the never-ending, sacrificial love God has for you. Yet reading about it and experiencing it are two different things. That is why it has been my continual prayer while writing this book that you'll *experience* God, for God is love. The expression of love requires a relationship, and God is all about relationships.

Unraveling Fairy Tales is meant to facilitate a deepening, intimate relationship with God, the one and only true God, who is crazy about you!

As we embark on this journey, each of us brings a story filled with drama, conflict, and complicated relationships. These entanglements keep us from living an abundant life until we allow them to serve a higher purpose: to draw us closer to the supreme Storyteller. God alone can unravel the messy parts of our lives, heal our wounds, bring truth to false beliefs, and set us free from bondages. Inner healing not only draws us to God, but it also removes what keeps us from experiencing love and intimacy with him.

Why fairy tales? Besides their familiarity, a rich symbolism exists. Like the voice of a heart expressing itself when words seem inadequate, universal themes lie within these stories, such as good versus evil, sacrifice versus selfishness, and freedom versus captivity. Our hearts recognize the familiar struggles, and we're drawn back to these memorable tales in search of a resolution. We want justice to prevail, life to have meaning, and happy endings to exist. Fairy tales offer more than a good story, they offer hope. Hope that fills the temporary G.A.P. between reality and our dream until that which is the **Good, Acceptable, and Perfect** will of God becomes our reality and our dream (see Romans 12:2).

Also woven into the fabric of each story are longings. Longings to be loved and adored, to have a purpose, to belong, to be accepted—warts and all—and in more subtle ways, to be rescued from a task, circumstance, relationship, or something we dislike about ourselves. These longings summon our hearts in search of fulfillment, only to discover the quest is impossible when limited

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to the world's inadequate offerings. Fairy tales hint at what our hearts suspect: there is more to this life than what meets the eye.

Somewhere deep within, we know we belong to something greater: a kingdom; and to some *One* greater: a King. We sense a world beyond the tangible—a spiritual world where *happily ever after* is possible in the here-and-now. We connect with fairy tales because of the parallels between the magical and spiritual worlds where strange creatures exist: angels, demons, and an antagonist—Satan; and where an all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-powerful King rules, who happens to be our Creator and loving Father. We believe this because his love draws our hearts to this conclusion and satisfies our longings by his presence. “For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Each story in *Unraveling Fairy Tales* highlights a common problem with which many of us struggle and will no doubt recognize in ourselves. By dissecting the fairy tales, we'll gain insight into specific difficulties. We'll find solutions by applying God's principles and receiving truth from Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Our ultimate goal is to know, love, and trust God more because we've *experienced* him. Freedom is the byproduct of knowing God. Freedom to dream, to believe, to act, to choose, to trust, to love, to give, and to die—to ourselves.

Herein lies the secret to living happily ever after: *to live for him*.

About this Book

The first chapter in this book addresses foundational truths helpful to spiritual growth. The following nine chapters center on different fairy tales and their corresponding problems. I've broken each chapter into five days so you can use this book as a weekly devotional or group study. At the end of each day, you'll find questions, an exercise, or just something to ponder. I call this *yada time*. It's meant to help you engage with God in an experiential, intimate way. Don't skip or rush through it. God longs to spend time with you. You may want to use a journal and record your feelings, questions, and experiences so you can look back and see how God continually reveals himself to you.

I've also included questions at the end of each chapter for personal reflection or to aid discussion for those meeting weekly in groups. Hebrews 10:25 says, "[Let us] not [give] up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." Though the most important interaction will happen daily between you and God, you'll gain additional benefits from discussing this book with others. A spiritual synergy occurs when believers gather to encounter God together. As we risk being vulnerable, God honors our transparency. When we share our burdens with others, we lighten our load. By expressing our hurts, healing can begin. When we confess our struggles, we diminish Satan's power over us. As we gather in Jesus' name—faith, hope, and love increase exponentially.

To those leading a group, the questions provided will probably be more than you can get through, depending on your allotted time. Feel free to choose which questions you discuss, giving others an opportunity to share what touched them most. At the end, share prayer requests and allow time to pray for each other. This will strengthen your group's relationships.

Chapter 1

Elements of a Fairy Tale—Foundational Truths

Memory Verse:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.
Ephesians 3:20–21

Day 1: Suspend Disbelief—and Believe

Imagine that a man has tied a thousand colorful helium balloons to his house, lifting it off its foundation until it floats into the wild blue yonder. Hard to believe? What if the man is an animated Pixar movie character? Then anything is possible, right? Did you recognize the *Up* movie plot?

To enjoy a fantasy movie or even a fairy tale, we must choose to believe things that aren't possible in the natural world. Samuel Taylor Coleridge first coined the phrase “suspension of disbelief” in 1817. He suggested that a reader would suspend judgment or disbelief in a fantastic tale if the writer included enough elements of “human interest and a semblance of truth.”¹

With the plethora of fairy tales, novels, television shows, and movies, I assume you are quite proficient at suspending disbelief. So, I'm asking that you not only suspend disbelief as we delve into the lives of fairy-tale characters, but also as we explore the fantastic solutions God offers. Suspend all disbelief and simply *believe*, even if an answer seems too good to be true, because God's answers fall into that category.

What we believe about God is important, too. I believe that God is triune—three Persons in one: God the Father, Jesus his Son, and the Holy Spirit. If you're not sure *who* God is, that's okay. There will be opportunities for him to reveal himself to you, but it's important that you believe he exists. Consider: “For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

It's also important to understand that in the Bible the word believe encompasses more than our English definition, which is to accept something as true. In the original New Testament language, the word believe in Greek is *pisteuo*. It's defined as “to have faith (in, upon, or with respect to, a person or thing), i.e. credit; by implication, to entrust (especially one's spiritual well-being to Christ).”²

James Dobson gave an illustration of faith many years ago on his radio talk show that left a lasting impression on me. Here's my version:

Imagine you're standing on the bank at the top of Niagara Falls with a crowd of people. A tightrope stretches above the falls and spans the length from side to side. The rushing water sprays your face as it violently descends. A young, muscular man appears. He's the reason you and the others have gathered. He pushes a wheelbarrow to the bank's edge where the tightrope begins, and he stops.

A camera person scans the crowd as a reporter addresses the audience. "Do you believe that this man can cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope while pushing a wheelbarrow?"

You've seen the advertisements and fully expect he can, so you shout with the others, "Yes, I believe!"

The reporter approaches the man with the wheelbarrow. "Do you have anything to say to your audience?"

The man locks eyes with you. "Get in! I'll push you across in the wheelbarrow."³

Would you get in? To say yes would take more than believing that he could do it; it would also take entrusting your life to him.

To a much lesser degree, we exercise faith daily when we flip a light switch, use a telephone, or turn the ignition key to start a vehicle. Faith doesn't require that we understand how something works; it only asks us to trust and act on our belief. But how would you feel if only half the time the lights came on when you flipped the switch? Or what if your car started only occasionally? My first car, a rusty 1978 Mercury Monarch, gave me little reason to have faith in it. Unreliability creates questionable faith and causes doubt. Thus, the object of our faith, in which we believe and place our trust, is of the utmost importance.

Neil Anderson, the author of *Victory over the Darkness*, writes about faith: "How much faith you have is dependent upon how well you know the object of your faith. When people struggle with their faith in God, it is not because their faith object has failed or is insufficient. It is because they don't have a true knowledge of God and His ways."⁴

For our faith (trust and belief) in God to grow, we need to know God—the person of our faith—better. Not just knowledge *about* him, but truly *know* him personally. In Hebrew, the Old Testament language, the word know is *yada*.⁵ It can mean varying degrees of knowing, but the one I want to focus on is when it refers to *knowing God experientially and intimately through a covenant relationship*. The Bible tells us Adam knew (yada) Eve, and she conceived a child. Adam didn't know *about* Eve he *knew* her. They were in a covenant relationship, and their union created a new life. Likewise, encounters with God will create a new life in us because of our covenant relationship with God through Jesus.

As you come to know (yada) God better, your faith will increase. Why is faith such a big deal? Hebrews 11:6 tells us "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

Faith pleases God, and he promises to reward "those who earnestly seek him." These rewards include such things as indescribable peace, unconditional love, exuberant joy, abundant

provision, and freedom from sin and condemnation, to name a few (see Philippians 4:7, Matthew 6:26, Nehemiah 8:10, Galatians 5:1, Romans 8:1). This sounds like a partial definition for living happily ever after to me.

The writer of Hebrews says faith is foundational: “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). In Greek, the word assurance is *hupostasis*. It means a substructure or foundation.⁶ Therefore, believing and trusting God is the foundation to expecting that which you cannot see. In *Great Cloud of Witnesses*, E.W. Bullinger explains faith this way:

We all hope for many things, but the question is, [w]hat foundation or ground have we for our hope? As to our hope for eternity, it all rests on the faithfulness of God’s promise. If there be no God; or, if His promise be not true, then we have no foundation whatever for our hope; all is baseless. Everything, therefore, depends upon the fact that God has spoken, and that what He has said is true. Faith is hearing God and believing what He says.⁷

If you struggle to hear God, don’t despair. Day three will cover the many ways God speaks to us and how we can experience and come to know him better. For now, believe that one way he speaks is through the Bible. Jesus said, “I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly” (John 10:10, NASB). God sent his Son, Jesus, so we could live happily ever after *now*.

It is by God’s gracious favor anyone believes and trusts in him, so faith is also a gift. If you struggle to believe or trust God, you can ask for his help, like the man who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus. An evil spirit had robbed the man’s son of speech and often threw him into fire or water, trying to kill him. In desperation, the father cried out to Jesus:

“But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

“If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:22–24)

Even though the father questioned Jesus’ ability to help, Jesus cast out the deaf and mute spirit from the man’s son. This gives me great hope. We don’t have to possess an unshakable, super-sized faith to approach Jesus with our problems. He is compassionate, loving, and willing to answer prayers despite wobbly faith. When you find yourself in a situation that seems hopeless and impossible, cry out to God, “I do believe, Jesus; help me overcome my unbelief!”

Mary and Martha, two of Jesus’ closest female friends, faced a different crisis. When their brother, Lazarus, was sick, they sent word to Jesus because they believed he could heal him. But Jesus took his time getting there, and Lazarus died. When Jesus finally arrived, Lazarus had been

in the tomb four days! I'd have been more than a little upset with Jesus. Possibly the sisters were, too.

Although Mary and Martha met with Jesus individually, each said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21, 32). Was that their polite way of blaming Jesus for Lazarus' death? Did they believe Jesus would raise their brother from the dead?

Jesus said to [Martha], "'Your brother will rise again.' Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day'" (John 11:23–24). Martha didn't ask Jesus to raise her brother from the dead. The situation seemed too impossible—he'd been dead for four days! She probably didn't have the slightest hope that things could change. This mindset continued even after Jesus commanded that the stone be rolled away from Lazarus' tomb. Martha cautioned Jesus, "By this time there is a bad odor ..." (John 11:39).

Don't you love Martha's honest response? She reacted like any of us might. Despite her doubt, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. When we can only think about how bad our situation stinks, Jesus still miraculously changes everything!

Though Martha couldn't believe in a miracle, she displayed remarkable faith—maybe even *great* faith. In a seemingly hopeless situation, she trusted Jesus and believed he was the promised Messiah. She didn't allow her sorrow or disappointment to distance her from him. She kept the line of communication open—and honest.

It's tempting to withdraw from God or blame him when solutions to problems appear to be taking too long. You may find yourself in this situation now: distant from God because of what you've been through. Faith isn't easy. It requires that we suspend disbelief—and believe, with an emphasis on trust—regardless of circumstances.

Living happily ever after is possible, but not apart from a relationship with Jesus. If you're struggling to trust him or your relationship feels distant, please don't give up. I believe God led you here and that your life is about to change for the better. But don't believe me, believe God, and seek him—because he rewards those who earnestly do. In Jeremiah 29:13, God said, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

In the movie *Up*, Carl Fredricksen eventually found what he was looking for and reached his dream destination, Paradise Falls. God offers us an even greater destination: Paradise without the "fall" (of mankind). Heaven is real, and we can experience foretastes of heaven while living on earth. Ephesians 2:6 says, "And God raised us *up* with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (emphasis added). We don't need a thousand helium balloons to reach Paradise—God gave us Jesus.

If you haven't begun a personal relationship with Jesus and would like to, you can turn to Appendix A for help in doing so.

Yada Time

Reflect on how well you *know* God. Think about the different times and ways you've experienced him. Don't hurry. Let the memories come.

How would you describe your relationship with him? Are you super close, distant, or somewhere in between? Regardless of your answer, in what ways would you like to know him better? Talk to him about this. What area in your life do you sense he wants you to believe and trust him more? With your spirit, listen to what he wants to tell you.

Day 2: Our Helper, the Holy Spirit

What would have happened had Cinderella's fairy godmother not shown up? It's doubtful she'd have met the Prince, let alone become his bride. Most likely she'd have continued to sweep fireplace cinders as a ridiculed servant to her abusive stepmother and ugly stepsisters for the rest of their lives.

What a difference a little help can make. Not just your ordinary, run-of-the-mill help, either, but supernatural help. Several other fairy-tale characters had influential sidekicks with special powers, too. Pinocchio had Jiminy Cricket. Aladdin had Genie. The Shoe Maker had magic elves. And Sleeping Beauty had christening fairies.

We're no exception. Our helper is the Holy Spirit. He is better than all the mythical, magical characters combined. For one thing, he's real—and magnificently powerful! The word dynamite comes from the Greek word *dunamis*, and the Bible uses it, among others, to describe him.⁸

How well do you know the Holy Spirit? To many, he's the least understood person of the triune Godhead and as mysterious as a fairy-tale character. He plays numerous roles, and without his help, it's impossible to live happily ever after. Though he's active in our lives, we don't always recognize his presence. At least that's been my experience, which I'll relate to you through this next story.

For Christmas one year, I bought my husband a fancy, automatic coffee maker. I considered the gift personal, given that coffee hasn't touched my lips since I mistakenly took a big, cold gulp of it as a child. The brewer's high-tech feature of percolating at a preset time sold me, along with guilt, because my husband left for work before I awoke. The coffee chamber was square, unlike our previous model's round compartment. Thus began my unsuccessful hunt for square coffee filters in the remaining days before Christmas.

After my husband had opened his gift, I explained I had searched diligently for square coffee filters and assured him I'd continue the quest. He simply asked, "Won't the round filters work?"

Sure enough, they did. I had searched for something I already possessed, much like my previous pursuit of the Holy Spirit, which I'll share more about in a minute.

In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit visited only certain people chosen by God, such as prophets and kings. But after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, God sent the Holy Spirit to earth to dwell in all believers. The book of Acts tells the story of when this happened:

When the day of Pentecost came, [Jesus' disciples] were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other [languages] as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1–4)

At age twelve, I asked Jesus to be my Lord and Savior. This was in 1975, during the peak of the Charismatic Movement. Crusades being held across the United States ushered in revival and a return to the days of the early church, manifested by the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit. Signs, wonders, miracles, healings, and speaking in tongues confirmed the Spirit's presence as he blew through communities and forever changed lives.

As with any movement, not everyone was moved—at least not in the same direction. The Holy Spirit, like the wind, distributed his gifts regardless of denominational beliefs, which polarized congregations and contributed to church splits. New denominations sprung up over differing beliefs, and to this day the subjects of the Holy Spirit, the baptism of the Spirit, and gifts of the Spirit elicit questions and, at times, controversy.

I share this brief history to encourage you not to let varying beliefs about the Holy Spirit cause division, especially if you are reading this book in a group. As a believer in Christ, you can be certain the Holy Spirit lives in you. Several experiences as a youth caused me to doubt this truth.

While growing up, I attended a small country church led by a Spirit-filled pastor. He and his wife belonged to the same fellowship group as my parents, which met weekly in our home's basement. I often listened from the top of our stairs, unseen, as they spoke in tongues, longing for such an experience.

Prior to being confirmed, the Pastor and his wife met privately with each student. During our meeting, they asked, "Would you like to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit?" I answered, "Yes," and they laid their hands on my head and prayed for the Holy Spirit to fill me. Nothing spectacular, or even tangible, happened as I had anxiously anticipated. No violent wind blew through. No strange language gushed from my lips. I've often wondered if they had expected, as had I, something more to have happened.

A few years later, a Spirit-filled classmate invited me to attend her Bible study group. They spoke in tongues at their gatherings and on several occasions laid hands on me to receive the gift of tongues. To my repeated embarrassment and disappointment, nothing happened then either.

Finally, years later while reading the Bible, the words "All do not speak with tongues, do they?" (1 Corinthians 12:30, NASB) jumped off the page and into my heart. Speaking in tongues is a gift, a manifestation, not exclusive evidence of God's Spirit living in a person. Realizing that the Holy Spirit had conveyed this message, I chose by faith to believe I had received the Spirit just as I had received Jesus into my heart.

Ephesians 1:13 says, “And you were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.”

Whether you believe the Holy Spirit is given at infant baptism, adult baptism, another baptism, confirmation, or when you received Christ as your Savior, *believe* the Holy Spirit lives in you. I lacked only the *assurance* of my possession, or, more accurately, his possession of me. We receive all God’s gifts by faith: salvation, the Holy Spirit, the gifts and fruit of the Spirit, and God’s wonderful promises.

The fairy godmother’s assignment was to give Cinderella a makeover. Likewise, the Holy Spirit’s task is to transform us. Let’s face it—we’re all a little messed up. The Holy Spirit works to clean us up from the inside out and transform us into our Savior’s likeness. Granted, the Father accepts us regardless of our condition. Our acceptance is based on what Jesus did on the cross and not on anything we’ll ever do. Yet the more we become like Jesus, the more we’ll experience happily ever after.

So, let’s look at the Holy Spirit’s job description by reading the following verses. I have made keywords bold for emphasis.

- “The Spirit himself **testifies** with our spirit that we are God’s children.” (Romans 8:16)
- “These are the things God has **revealed** to us by his Spirit. The Spirit **searches** all things, even the deep things of God.” (1 Corinthians 2:10)
- “The Spirit himself **intercedes** for us through wordless groans.” (Romans 8:26)
- “God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the **sanctifying work** of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.” (2 Thessalonians 2:13)
- “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22–23)
- “Now to each one the **manifestation of** the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given [**gifts**] through the Spirit the message of wisdom ... the message of knowledge ... faith ... gifts of healing ... miraculous powers ... prophecy ... distinguishing between spirits ... speaking in different kinds of tongues ... the interpretation of tongues ...” (1 Corinthians 12:7–10)

Before Jesus returned to heaven, he told his disciples:

“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will **teach** you all things and will **remind** you of everything I have said to you.” (John 14:26) “He will **guide** you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will **speak**, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will **glorify** me because it is from me that he will receive what he will **make known** to you.” (John 16:13–14, emphasis added)

These verses explain why Jesus said it was for our benefit that he would leave (see John 16:7). He’d then send the Holy Spirit who teaches, reminds, guides, sanctifies, testifies, washes, renews, reveals, searches, speaks, comforts, counsels, empowers, intercedes, guides, gives glory and life and gifts, produces fruit in our lives, and more. Wow, talk about busy!

God is passionate about seeing us changed because he loves us too much to leave us in our present condition. He knows living happily ever after is impossible in our sinful state. Therefore, he gave us his Spirit—the same powerhouse Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead—which means we have resurrection power at work in us (see Romans 8:11, Ephesians 1:19–20).

Like a round coffee filter in a square coffee chamber, the Holy Spirit embodies our current shape and transforms us into Jesus’ likeness. If he’s the filter, then we’re the beans. What does it take for beans to release their flavor? A lot of hot water—after they’ve first been ground! Brokenness and difficulties release Jesus’ aroma in and through us. Yet, like coffee, we keep our own unique flavor because God is a coffee connoisseur. The Spirit not only transforms us, but he also equips us to transform the world. Therefore, I believe God would say, “I’ve given you the Holy Spirit, so let’s get brewing!”

Yada Time

Reflect on the action words and gifts attributed to the Holy Spirit found on the previous pages. In what specific ways has the Holy Spirit been at work in your life? If you need help remembering, ask the Holy Spirit to remind you. Take a moment to record those stories in your journal, such as the time he orchestrated a divine encounter with someone, or when he helped you with a decision or gave you a greater understanding of something. How did these events draw you closer to God?

In what area of your life do you sense him now at work?

Thank the Holy Spirit for his previous and persistent involvement.

Day 3: Are You Talking to Me?

Can you imagine a fairy tale without dialogue? Bor-ring. In any story, characters should talk and have something worthwhile to say. Even silent movies weren’t *silent*. Besides the mood-setting

music, title cards appeared on-screen after an actor or actress spoke because they not only had to communicate with each other, they had to communicate with their audience.

In the movie *Cast Away*, the main character, Chuck, was stranded on a deserted island for four years. Did he talk? Certainly he did, and not only to himself. He drew a face on a volleyball named “Wilson” and talked to it—because God created us for relationships. For any relationship to be meaningful, it must include some form of two-way communication.

The various communication modes have advanced exponentially since I was young. Besides sharing a single, corded telephone with seven family members, we also shared one telephone line among neighbors—called a party line. Believe me, it was no party. Waiting for neighbors to end their conversations tested my patience and self-control. The temptation to eavesdrop persisted, since the only way to know if someone had finished their conversation was to pick up the receiver and listen.

Obviously, this was decades before the widespread availability of cell phones and the internet, back in the 70s when global communication seemed as likely as contacting an alien from another planet. Yet, we learned from the 1982 movie *E.T.* that even an extra-terrestrial will find a way to phone home. We think nothing of calling or video chatting with friends and family around the globe today. Improvements in communication continue to advance because we’re relational at our core, with a God-given need to communicate.

To elicit interaction, we may ask questions such as “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who’s the fairest one of all?” or “Do these jeans make my butt look fat?” We don’t always ask questions to receive a truthful answer. Now factor in nonverbal cues such as eye contact, facial expressions, and tone of voice. Like any learned skill, good communication takes practice—and good listening skills. James 1:19 says, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

Communication with God is no different. It requires listening and, more importantly, believing God does and will speak to *you*. Unfortunately, some of us treat God like Chuck’s volleyball; we talk to God and don’t listen because we don’t expect him to reply. What kind of relationship would we have if God didn’t speak to us? Yet God rarely speaks in an audible voice, so it’s imperative that we learn to recognize his voice and the ways he communicates.

Graciously, God has given us a hearing aid. “For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:11).

Like GPS navigation, the Holy Spirit is our communication link with God. He knows our exact coordinates, where we’re headed, and everything else about us, including our thoughts before we think them. Even more amazing, God invites us to become as personally acquainted with him as he is with us. This intimate communication system gains us access to God’s thoughts! Let’s see someone invent something better than that.

God is Spirit. So when he speaks, he speaks to your spirit, sometimes referred to as your inner being or heart. It’s where the Holy Spirit resides in every believer. His words may come as thoughts in your mind or impressions in your spirit. Some describe this communication as simply

knowing something they can't attribute to originating from themselves. His voice can be heard through what we think, read, hear, sense, or see—like how highlighted words on a page grab our attention. God is extremely creative, and his choice of highlighter often varies in intensity, ranging from a still small voice, like Elijah's mountain-top experience, to a burning-bush encounter such as Moses had.

Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (John 10:27, NASB).

If you think you've never heard God's voice, it's likely you have but just didn't recognize it as such. You definitely heard his voice when you realized your need for Jesus. The Holy Spirit called to you then, and he has never stopped talking to you. Have you ever felt the need to pray for or call a friend at the exact moment they needed you? That was the Holy Spirit's nudge. Has a specific song come on the radio right when you needed to hear the comforting or encouraging words? Again, God was speaking to you.

God communicates with us because he loves us and we're in a relationship with him—a relationship based on love, trust, and on him being in control. It isn't that he wants subjects to boss around; it's because he knows what's best for us. He communicates so we will know (yada) him better, as a friend. He wants to share his thoughts, ways, truths, purposes, and plans with us, which also reveal his heart.

Examples of how God speaks are many and diverse. He speaks through visions, dreams, nature, angels, Scripture, and prophets. Less obvious ways include open doors, circumstances, a still small voice, spiritual gifts, timing, peace, desires, counsel of others, songs, books, billboards, sermons, or clocks. The examples are endless. Whole books have been written about hearing God's voice. This one day's dedication to the subject is meant to create expectancy that you, too, will hear him. If recognizing his voice is new to you, don't despair. I've woven stories throughout this book as various examples of how God has spoken to me.

God often speaks loudest to me through the Bible, his written Word. It's as relevant today as when it was first scribed, and it should be the plumb line by which we measure everything we hear. God will never tell you something that contradicts what he's already said in his Word. He may bring new understanding or interpretation to a verse, but even then he will support it with other Scripture passages. Becoming familiar with what the Bible says will help you distinguish God's voice from your thoughts, worldly desires, and the enemy's voice.

But not every answer to a specific problem is found in the Bible. If it were, we wouldn't need to hear his voice or be in a relationship with him. We might even be tempted to elevate his written Word above God himself. He knows what each person needs to hear. Like a good parent, our heavenly Father speaks to us individually and in ways we can understand.

We often recognize God's voice best after the fact. We learn from experience, from hearing correctly and incorrectly. So, it's important that we continue to listen and learn. For example, when the Children's Ministry Director (CMD) position opened at our church, I applied, longing to be in full-time ministry. For several days, I poured out my heart to God. Then one evening while reading my Bible, a verse leaped off the page and brought excitement to my heart. "Eli answered, 'Go in

peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him” (1 Samuel 1:17). I interpreted this to mean that God had heard my prayer and I’d get the CMD job. From then on, I believed the job was mine. I even told the committee during my interview that I thought God wanted me to have the job. Imagine my disappointment and embarrassment when they hired someone else.

I learned several things from this experience. First, I could survive disappointment with God and still love him. Second, faith isn’t a magic formula guaranteeing something will happen because a person believes strongly enough. Third, we don’t always correctly interpret what we hear. God had said he’d heard my heart’s cry. In all honesty, I’d have taken any job in ministry. A change in perspective helped me realize I don’t need a title from a church to be about my Father’s business. We’re already in ministry if we’re doing what he has called us to do, which includes working at anything.

Mistakes in hearing happen, partly because we hear and interpret through filters: mindsets, belief systems, prejudices, preconceived answers, etc. Mistakes are part of the learning curve. Yes, the fear of making a mistake can be frightening. But when we seek God for an answer, our trust should be in his ability to communicate and not in our ability to hear. So, relax and trust that he will make the answer clear to you. One verse I repeat to myself when waiting on God’s answer is “Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it’” (Isaiah 30:21).

When an opportunity arose to change employers, I again sought God for direction. All signs indicated God was behind this change, but the decision was difficult because the risk was great. Leaving my current employer meant giving up the security of a base salary, great health and dental coverage, a 401K, and six weeks’ paid vacation. The mortgage company pursuing me offered none of these. But because my income would be commission-based, I’d have the freedom to set my own hours and pursue writing during slow times.

As I contemplated this huge decision, I trusted that God would make his will clear. With my husband’s support, I waited for God’s answer. During a time of general prayer with friends, a woman sensed the Lord saying, “Cast your bread upon the waters.” I opened my Bible and found the verse in Ecclesiastes 11:1. Curious as to its meaning, I read the notes in my *NASB Study Bible*, which says, “Be adventurous ... accept the risks ... Do not always play it safe.”⁹ In my spirit, I knew God had confirmed that I should change jobs.

God has more to say besides directing our paths. He longs to spend time with us and tell us how much he loves us. He works to remove our filters, so we can hear and accurately interpret his words. His voice reveals who he truly is—our happily ever after.

Yada Time

Reflect on the times you’ve heard God’s voice. Write them in a journal if you haven’t already. By documenting these times, you’ll be more expectant and alert to hearing his voice. It will also provide encouragement when you look back and remember.

If you don't easily recognize his voice, ask the Lord for help. The prophet, Eli, counseled Samuel, a young boy, to say to the Lord, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10). Tell God you are listening, and, by faith, believe he will speak to you. Then pay attention—because it is by getting your attention God speaks. For example, notice when a question pops into your mind, and expect God to provide the answer.

More important, God wants you to know (yada) how much he loves and accepts you. Some words are best spoken through the heart. Be prepared for such an experience.

Day 4: Drama and Trauma

My niece Maggie is a drama princess. She's not a full-fledged queen yet because she's only nine, and her meltdowns and theatrics happen mostly when she's tired. But even in a good mood, she's a performer. She's the baby in her family and in our extended family, and when we're all together, she's the center of attention.

Be honest, have you ever created a little drama just for entertainment? I'm guilty, especially with Maggie. One weekend we taught her how to play the game Telephone. Hearing how muddled a message became provided our entertainment. Yet, this outcome infuriated my niece. Her drama enticed me even more to relay the next message imperfectly. Knowing a person's expectation and altering the outcome can create drama.

This type of drama is child's play, yet real-life drama in adult lives is anything but fun and games. Drama is what keeps us reading a story or watching a movie. It may be entertaining when it's happening to someone else, but who wants to be the queen of it? Drama infers conflict, serious storylines, and tragedies. These are the events, situations, and circumstances we hope to avoid. When they happen, we blame them as our reason for not living happily ever after.

Is happiness even possible in a drama-filled world?

The Bible tells us yes. Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, NASB).

Jesus spoke these words to his disciples the week of his crucifixion. Talk about drama! More than stating the indisputable fact that bad things happen, Jesus was preparing his friends. He knew how and when he would die, and he cared about what would happen to them afterward. He knew they would be persecuted along with others who professed him as Lord. Of the remaining eleven disciples, all except John were martyred. And they all lived joyous lives and died courageously because Jesus had given them the "how-to" answer: to live *in him*.

Yes, Jesus is the answer to all life's trials and problems, and only *in him* do we find true happiness and peace. This peace encompasses more than the absence of noise or strife, and his Jewish disciples would have understood the rich meaning of the Hebrew word for peace: *Shalom*.

It includes health, healing, harmony, prosperity, and overall well-being.¹⁰ That sounds a lot like happily ever after to me.

Jesus also said, “Take courage,” or, in other Bible versions, “Take comfort,” or, “Be of good cheer.” He was telling them to *choose* it, or to *take* it, because he had overcome (conquered) the world and they could too. He was confident that he had succeeded at his mission even before his death.

I promised not to tell you the answer without also giving you the how-to piece. So *how* do we live *in him*? We choose to walk, talk, and interact with God throughout our day, every day. The more we grow in our relationship with God, the better we’ll understand how to live *in him*—with the Holy Spirit’s help, of course. That means—change is coming!

In my senior year of college, I entered a fashion design contest and modeled my fitted, sleeveless blouse in a tropical print with matching cropped pants. To add pizzazz to the ensemble, I wound a band of the same colorful fabric around my head, turban style, forcing my shoulder-length hair to jet up and out the opening like a volcanic eruption. On the day of the contest, I felt nauseous and assumed it was nerves. After making it down the runway, then into a restroom (thankfully), I threw up. But my abdominal pain escalated. When I could no longer stand without doubling over, my fiancé drove me to the emergency room.

Imagine the pain level it took for me to leave my dorm room with my hair still standing at attention (though now out of its turban). I looked as if I’d been electrocuted. Even so, the hospital shouldn’t have tried to send me home without helping me. Refusing to leave, I cried, “Make it stop hurting.”

The next morning, a doctor removed my appendix during exploratory surgery. Afterward, he told me the incision was only an inch-or-two long and in a position where it wouldn’t be seen while wearing a bikini. I couldn’t have cared less, having only wanted the pain to stop.

Pain’s positive side is that by its presence we know when we are hurt, sick, or something is wrong. It moves us to act. Yet, too often pain serves no purpose other than to hurt. Read any newspaper or turn on the television and see how senseless pain infiltrates lives. Many of us needn’t look any further than our households for examples. Who doesn’t view pain as an adversary to living happily ever after?

The source of pointless pain is never God. He doesn’t cause us to get cancer, break a leg, or have a car accident. God is good. He *allows* bad things to happen because he’s given us free will. Unfortunately, we often make poor choices, causing others and ourselves pain. This doesn’t mean God leaves us to our own devices. On the contrary, to those who love him, he’s made this promise: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Trusting that God will bring about good from life’s dramas and traumas is foundational to happiness.

Living happily isn’t about avoiding or managing pain, it’s about walking *through* it with God’s help and allowing him to redeem (make something good from) your situation. This involves inner healing or trauma recovery, and to some degree, we’re all in recovery. In *Living From the*

Heart Jesus Gave You, the authors state: “Recovery is about exceeding one’s current potential, and reaching one’s God-intended destiny.”¹¹ This requires that we face the pain in our lives so we’ll learn lessons, gain power, achieve maximum growth, and then help others do the same.

The authors separate trauma into two categories. Type A trauma is the absence of good things, and Type B trauma is the presence of bad things. To varying degrees, we’ve all experienced both forms.

God created us with needs. Type A traumas occur when those who are supposed to love and care for us withhold good things from us. Besides our basic necessities, examples include unconditional love, guidance, discipline, nurturing, protection, and a safe environment. They should encourage us to become the person God created us to be. But our parents and teachers aren’t perfect, and living in this broken world causes many wounds from the absence of these good things.

It’s easy to downplay Type A traumas because we often compare them to what we reason are worse things such as abuse, which falls under Type B trauma. Plus, we may feel disloyal to our parents, whom we love, by acknowledging these losses. They did the best they could, after all. But when we view Type A traumas as insignificant we remain confused about why we struggle in life. “It is important to remember that to discount ‘lesser’ trauma is to avoid the truth about how much it hurts, and thereby miss the chance for healing.”¹²

Type B trauma is harmful by its existence, such as in verbal, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. These are more easily recognized as trauma and they vary in degree of cruelty. The ramifications of these traumas tend to manifest themselves in more visible ways. Children and adults may act out, often perpetuating a cycle of abuse or victimization.

Trauma from abuse isn’t always recognized by the person. The Lord created our brains with coping mechanisms that allow us to deny these traumas for self-preservation. It may feel threatening to your existence to address these wounds—if you can even access their memory. Yet the Lord knows what happened to you. Facing your past will take courage, and God will walk with you on this path to healing and freedom.

Unfinished trauma recovery makes it difficult to live happily ever after. When pain from our past isn’t sufficiently dealt with, it won’t stay in our past. Like an infected wound, it won’t heal. It needs cleansing, which requires that we bring our wounds into God’s presence. By God’s grace we can deal with the infection (pain, hurt, trauma, lie, sin, guilt, anger, bitterness, etc.) so healing can begin.

Sometimes healing happens instantaneously, and other times it’s a process. Yet trauma recovery is vital to living happily ever after. Therefore, I pray this book helps facilitate your healing through encounters with God, our Healer. Then we can replace our drama-queen crowns with the crowns he provides. We’ll tell our drama-filled stories from a place of victory, sharing how God took what the enemy meant for evil and brought about our happy endings (see Genesis 50:20).

Yada Time

You might be tempted to dig up your past hurts all at once, but please don't. Let each one surface in God's timing. When they do, talk to God about them. Ask for his truth and healing touch. Give him your pain and follow the Holy Spirit's guidance. You may need to forgive someone, including yourself. If at any time a traumatic memory seems too difficult or painful to process, seek help from a friend or a professional familiar with inner healing.

We may never understand the *why* behind our traumas, but we can trust God to work all things for our good (see Romans 8:28). Meditate on this truth. Believe he will bring healing to your deepest wounds. End your time by thanking God in advance for what he is about to do in your life. Healing change is on its way!

Day 5: Happily Ever After

When God gave me the idea for this book in 1999, happily ever after seemed right around the corner—as did the Lord's return in the midst of the Y2K frenzy. That year, our circle of Christian friends expanded as my husband and I began hosting a fellowship group in our home. Together we experienced God. Physical healings occurred, like when the painful ganglion cyst on my wrist disappeared. Our group traveled to a Christian conference where mysterious gold dust sparkled on our skin. Deep, emotional inner healing also took place, such as when God replaced a lie I had believed for twenty-seven years with the truth and miraculously restored my relationship with my mom. I'll share more details about this in the next chapter. The Lord's presence was tangible during this season, and in his presence are the fullness of joy, freedom, and miracles.

It's easy to live happily ever after when experiencing the Lord's manifested presence. But what happens when the "glory cloud" seems to depart, when it's hard to hear the Lord's voice, or the answers to our prayers are delayed and miracles seem nonexistent? Is it possible even then to live happily ever after?

While writing this book, doubt crept in. I struggle some days to live above my circumstances, like when fibromyalgia pain keeps me from writing or doing anything else. How could I write this book and not make false promises or appear to be a hypocrite? As I explained this to the Lord, he repeatedly encouraged me to keep writing. At the height of my struggle, he led me to reread one of my favorite classics. In the preface to the allegory *Hinds' Feet on High Places*, the author, Hannah Hurnard, wrote, "The High Places and the hinds' feet do not refer to heavenly places after death, but are meant to be the glorious experience of God's children here and now—if they will follow the path he chooses for them."¹³

Maybe those words don't speak to you, but I heard God's voice clearly. We *can* live happily ever after on this side of heaven, so I'll do my best to lead you on a journey that will bring you closer to it, trusting God to accomplish his purposes through this book.

I'm convinced living happily ever after is possible, are you?

Even if you're not, you may secretly hope it is. Why else would you still be reading? Perhaps it's because God led you here. That has been my prayer, along with God richly blessing you. Living happily ever after isn't reserved for fairy tales or the afterlife—which, by the way, exists—and heaven will far exceed any happily ever after you could imagine.

It's for us today. Here and now.

First, we should probably establish what happily ever after looks like so we're on the same page. How would you define happily ever after? Grab your journal and take a few moments to describe what you're looking for or what you expect.

In fairy tales, the words *happily ever after* insinuate the story's drama is over. But the words *ever after* infer there is more life to be lived. Orson Welles said, "If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story."¹⁴ Stories conclude when what follows would bore the socks off you. A perfectly happy life wouldn't keep anyone's attention. Is that what you're looking for?

Maybe we should start with the definition of happy. The words used to define happy are as similarly vague and abstract: pleasure, contentment, fortunate. A few synonyms include cheerful, joyful, jolly, and merry. Sounds like a description of Santa Claus, the character we often confuse with the real meaning of Christmas. But I digress.

Happiness is subjective. What makes one person happy doesn't always make the next person happy. Sure, we could probably agree on some basics, but let's aim higher than our needs. What would make you happy—really happy? Grab your journal again and take another moment to access your mental list of if-only wishes to happiness. Think hard.

How long would those things make you happy? Are you sure? We're talking ever after, after all, which is a long time. Are you mentally adding a few additional things to your list?

Beyond the basics, we all need loving people in our lives and loving relationships to help fulfill our need to belong. We also need a sense of purpose. Whatever your list includes, whatever you think will make you happy, if it doesn't include an intimate relationship with Jesus then we aren't on the same page—yet.

God knows all your needs because he hardwired them in you. He knows your heart's desires, and he wants to give them to you. He only asks you to put him first in your life, and that's because only *in him* will all your wants, needs, desires, and more be fulfilled. You knew I'd end up here, right?

Any path other than the one leading to Jesus is a happily-ever-after counterfeit. Worldly happiness promises one thing and delivers another because our sin nature will demand more. That could be why the word *content* is one word used to define happy.

Long before the movie character Jerry Maguire said "You complete me" to the love of his life, the Apostle Paul stated the same thing about Jesus to the church at Colossae. "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete" (Colossians 2:9–10, NASB). Jesus completes us, and he provides the true meaning of happily ever after—love story included.

Isn't romance at the heart of happily ever after? The three small words preceding it say yes: "and *they* lived ..." It's seldom written singularly, such as "he or she" lived happily ever after. Fairy tales conclude when two characters find each other and love redeems them. Was love included on your happiness list? Maybe you couldn't even dream of romantic love as an option. Finding a soulmate won't complete you. You're a spiritual being, and nothing on this earth—no other person or thing—can, or will, fill the *complete-me* void within you. The completion you long for is only found *in him*, Jesus.

The answer may be simple, yet the "how to" is easier said than done. You may already know this if you're at all acquainted with Jesus' teachings. For example, "Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it'" (Mark 8:34–35).

Was Jesus serious? Take up a cross? Isn't dying the opposite of living happily ever after here on earth? No, it's still the answer. Before you toss this book across the room, think about how living for yourself has worked so far. Isn't that how most of our messes get started? Jesus offers a way out of an unhappy, unfulfilling, unacceptable life. "Follow me," he says. Lose all rights to your life by surrendering it to him.

When a rich, young ruler asked Jesus what he must do to receive eternal life, Jesus answered, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Matthew 19:21, NASB).

Jesus didn't tell him he had to sell all his possessions to be saved. He addressed the rich young ruler's real question: How does one live happily ever after? Or, more accurately, how is one made complete? Isn't this where most of us get stuck? We've accepted Jesus as Savior and know we're going to heaven, yet we feel incomplete, like something is still missing.

The Greek word used here for complete is *teleios*. In English, this word is translated elsewhere in the Bible as perfect. It means "to end, complete, consecrate, finish, fulfill ... in various applications of labor, growth, mental and moral character."¹⁵

It's used in Matthew 5:48: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Sound impossible? Would Jesus command us to do what isn't possible? No. In him, we *were* made perfect—complete. That's how God already sees us because he operates outside of time. He sees the beginning from the end. The process of *becoming* how God sees us is called sanctification. So, we *were* made complete, and we *are being* made complete—both through a relationship with Jesus as we abide (live) in him.

Like the concept of living happily ever after, living "in and for him" may seem abstract, subjective, and difficult to obtain. What would that entail? And wouldn't it look different for each person? If you're willing to find out, the rest of this book will answer those questions and show you how—because happily ever after is only found in a personal relationship with Jesus. God isn't concerned with religion, he's concerned with relationships. He wants you to know him intimately.

Jesus' answer to the rich young ruler was to "sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). We aren't told

whether the young man did so, but we are told “he went away sad, because he had great wealth” (Matthew 19:22).

Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). It doesn’t matter if your treasure is your money, spouse, house, children, career, social status, or—you fill in the blank. Whatever, or whoever, has first place in your heart is your treasure. If it isn’t God, happily ever after will continue to slip through your fingers no matter how hard you try to grab hold of it.

God wants to be your treasure so much that he creates and allows circumstances to help turn your heart toward him. He also tries to capture your heart by romancing you. Have you ever thought about being romanced by God? I hadn’t until it spilled out of my heart in prayer one day. I was really saying, “God, please remind me of how much you love me. I need to experience your love.”

God’s love is audacious, indescribable, irresistible, and unconditional. Once you’ve experienced it, you can’t help but fall madly in love with him and give yourself completely to him. Isn’t that what happily ever after is all about, spending your life with the One you love? The One who completes you?

Then get ready to be swept off your feet!

Yada Time

Dare to ask God to romance you. If you’re unsure of what that will look like when he does, trust me, you’ll know when it happens. Maybe you’ll awaken to a song playing in your mind. The words will be God singing to you. Or you’ll witness a majestic act in nature, such as a meteor shower, a falling star, or a soaring eagle. I feel romanced whenever I see double digits on a clock—11:11, for example—which reminds me of God’s double portion of love. Whatever it is, it will be something special to you.

If you haven’t asked him to romance you yet, what are you waiting for? Go ahead, ask. Then stay **A**lert, **W**atch, and **E**xpect to be romanced—and you’ll be in AWE of what God does!

Chapter 1

Elements of a Fairy Tale—Foundational Truths

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

Day 1: Suspend Disbelief—and Believe

1. Define faith in your own words and why it is important. (p. 5)
2. Share a time when you heard from God and how your faith grew.
3. Define yada and how it relates to faith. (p. 5)
4. In what area would you like to know God better?

Day 2: Our Helper, the Holy Spirit

1. Did you ever have any misconceptions about the Holy Spirit?
2. Like a fairy godmother, what major role does the Holy Spirit play in our lives? (p. 10)
3. Discuss the Holy Spirit's "job descriptions." (p. 10–11)
4. Share stories that demonstrate how the Holy Spirit is active in our lives.
5. What word best describes how the Holy Spirit is currently at work in your life?
6. Share any experience you have with journaling.

Day 3: Are You Talking to Me?

1. How does God communicate with us? Share examples. (pp. 12–13)
2. Share a time when you recognized God's voice and acted on it.
3. If you've ever misinterpreted what God said, what did you learn from it?

4. How can we position ourselves to listen for God's voice more intentionally?
5. Share a Bible verse God used to answer a question or encourage you in the past.
6. How did God speak to you this week?

Day 4: Drama and Trauma

1. What does it mean to live in Jesus, and why should this be our goal? (p. 16)
2. Discuss the differences between type A and type B traumas. (p. 17)
3. Why do people downplay type A traumas? (p. 17)
4. If you feel comfortable, briefly share how God redeemed a trauma you experienced.
5. Have you experienced a trauma you'd like prayer for? Consider sharing your request during your group's prayer time.

Day 5: Happily Ever After

1. Did your definition of happily ever after change? If so, in what way?
2. People often think, "If only I had ..., or if only ... was different, I'd be happy." Discuss where you've looked for happiness and what you've learned.
3. Had you ever thought about God romancing you? (p. 21)
4. Share how God romanced you this week.
5. Is there anything else in this chapter you want to discuss?

Like Mary and Martha whose brother had been dead for four days, we face situations that really stink—and require a miracle from Jesus. Share prayer requests and pray for each other. Let's believe for a miracle together.

Chapter 2

Cinderella—Embracing Your True Identity

Memory Verse:

*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called
children of God! And that is what we are!
1 John 3:1*

Day 1: Princess Incognito

When someone describes a movie as a Cinderella story, we're all familiar with the rags-to-riches plot. Despite its familiarity, there's something endearing that draws us into watching another variation, such as *Ever After*, *Ella Enchanted*, *A Cinderella Story*, *Pretty Woman*, or *Caddyshack*.

In the movie *Caddyshack*, Bill Murray plays Carl Spackler, a lowly country club groundskeeper. Pretending to be a finalist in the Masters Golf tournament, he says about himself, "What an incredible Cinderella story," as he beheads carnations, one by one, with his golf club. He continues, "A former greenskeeper, and now, about to become the Masters Champion." He swings and steps back. "It looks like a mirac— it's in the hole! It's in the hole!"¹

Who doesn't root for the underdog? We cheer when the have-nots triumph over those who have. Is it because we can easily relate? We know how it feels *not* to be top dog. It hurts to be overlooked and underappreciated. Our lives may seem ordinary, but they're not. As the King's daughters, we are anything but ordinary.

We are princesses!

Still, I struggle to embrace my true identity. Too often I feel more like a cook or a cleaning woman than a princess. On a super bad day, I may even be mistaken for an ugly stepsister. I don't always look, act, or feel like a princess when I allow people, circumstances, or emotions to influence how I see myself.

It's easy to forget or choose not to identify with being the King's daughter. You're a princess, you know, if you've asked Jesus to be your Lord and Savior. That's all it took and—BAM! You were rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into his marvelous kingdom of light, forever to be God's beloved daughter (see Colossians 1:12–13).

Do you realize what a big deal that is? The benefits are out of this world, literally. It's also the prerequisite to living happily ever after. Does your life reflect the life of a princess? If you answered no, you're not alone. Most of us fail to embrace our true identities and live up to our

potential. We live less-than-ordinary lives, like Cinderella's pre-palace days, with our true identities concealed.

We live incognito.

I love saying the word *incognito*. As the syllables roll off my tongue, it feels as if I've finally mastered a foreign language. The word sounds mysterious and evokes images from old detective movies, such as Humphry Bogart wearing a trench coat lurking in the shadows. His wide-brimmed fedora slants over his forehead and rests on dark glasses while he searches for a mysterious, veiled woman.

We may not physically hide, but emotionally and spiritually we conceal our true selves from others. Perhaps it's out of guilt, shame, or the fear of not being accepted. Or maybe we simply don't know who we are—because we fail to remember *whose* we are.

God says you are special, significant, chosen, greatly loved, and that he has an amazing plan for your life. There is no other princess like you. Until you believe you are everything God says you are, you will live incognito—and forfeit living happily ever after before heaven. Are you ready to embrace your true identity? Let's begin by learning to *LAF* like a true princess.

Go ahead, laugh.

Most people would benefit from laughing more often; however, the LAF I'm referring to is an acronym for the words: Look, Act, and Feel. It's difficult to embrace our royalty when bombarded with misconceptions about our LAF (looks, actions, and feelings). Like the glass slipper on the ugly stepsister's foot, we think our LAF doesn't fit. So, let's unravel the LAF of a fairy-tale princess to embrace our true identities.

What images surface when you envision a princess? Take a moment to imagine what she looks like.

Whether you imagined one of the many Disney princesses or the real-life Princess Kate Middleton, she's gorgeous, right? The princess I envision has long flowing hair, a clear, vibrant complexion, and a Jennifer Lopez figure. She may not be perfect, but she's closer to a "ten" in my mind than I'll ever be. She dresses exquisitely on every occasion, with just the right shoes, purse, and jewelry to match her designer outfit. Ugh! Who can compare?

Imagine how this princess acts.

Perfectly, you say? She could teach Miss Manners a thing or two. You won't catch her committing a faux pas for the tabloids to print. She efficiently accomplishes all she sets out to do without self-doubt or grumbling.

Bear with me one moment longer and consider a princess' temperament.

With Mary Poppins' disposition, she awakens every morning with a song in her heart and its lyrics on her perfectly plump lips. Words like depressed, lonely, afraid, or angry aren't in her vocabulary. She's energetic and feels as if she could conquer the world, and I expect her to. After all, she's a princess living happily ever after.

Okay, you get my point. There is no way our LAFs (looks, actions, and feelings) will ever measure up to such an idealistic image. Nor should we insist they do. We know this perfect woman doesn't exist even if magazines and the media try to convince us otherwise. Besides, we're a

different type of princess. We're a Christian princess. We aren't supposed to LAF like a worldly or fairy-tale princess. We have our own beautiful LAF—one that's more ... spiritual?

We can even become disheartened by trying to LAF like a super-Christian princess—one who's several spiritual women rolled into one. First, she's ambitious like the Proverbs 31 woman who even wove the cloth she used to sew her family's clothing while buying and selling real estate. *Whew! I'm already exhausted.* Boy, can this godly princess worship! Like Mary, she spends hours sitting at Jesus' feet. She also has the heart of Mother Teresa. In her spare time, she volunteers at a soup kitchen, makes blankets for the homeless, and fills hundreds of shoe boxes for Operation Christmas Child.

You may not have envisioned these specific women, but I suspect you've tried to LAF (look, act, and feel) like someone other than yourself. Perhaps your ideal is a fairy-tale princess combined with a super-Christian princess—some beautiful creature whose LAF is in the world but not of it. Maybe you've met women who appear to be this hybrid type, but they're the last women on earth you'd ever want to LAF like—because they seldom *laugh*.

Perhaps the *princess* title seems too worn-out, generic, feminine, or too idealistic to you. Or, you'd rather be a queen! If this rings true for you, please indulge me a bit longer as we look at how the Bible describes a Christian princess' LAF.

She dresses modestly, and her beauty doesn't come from outward adornments such as braided hair or wearing gold jewelry and fine clothing. Instead, she radiates inner beauty with a gentle and quiet spirit (see 1 Peter 3:3–4). She's considerate, caring, and gives generously to all in need. She spends her time productively, worshipfully, and sacrificially (Proverbs 31). Shame, guilt, and remorse have no place in her life. She's overjoyed because she's overcome fear, anger, jealousy, resentment, and the need to control. It doesn't bother her if she doesn't fit in at work or social gatherings. Not fitting into her favorite jeans doesn't even cause her a meltdown. She's not depressed, lonely, or anxious. She feels special because her heavenly Father has told her she is.

This biblical princess may also seem like a fairy tale. But there's genuineness in her LAF (looks, actions, and feelings), and if we're honest, deep inside we want to LAF like this. We dream of becoming her because we know she's truly happy. Soon, you can be too when you learn to LAF like the beautiful, unique princess God created you to be.

Isn't it time to stop living incognito and embrace your true identity? What do you have to lose—except an inaccurate self-image?

Yada Time

In what areas would you like to see yourself more positively? Talk with God about those struggles. Let him know you want to LAF more like him, and you want to see yourself as he sees you. Imagine sitting on his lap and placing your head against his chest. Can you hear his heart beating for you? Listen to what he says to you. Write down what you hear/sense.

Day 2: Jesus' LAFTER

Attending the Royal Ball must have felt like a dream to Cinderella—and dancing with the Prince was the icing on her royal cake. “Who, me?” she may have stammered. “How could this be?” Perhaps the crowd wondered the same thing. Where had she come from? Who was this beauty capturing the Prince’s attention, winning his heart? As the two glided across the dance floor, I imagine a playful interchange occurred. “Did it hurt when you fell from heaven?” he asked. Not only was he charming, but also witty. She notably blushed, and his gaze deepened. “There must be something wrong with my eyes. I can’t take them off you.”

Oh, to be madly in love.

I fell for my current husband at a singles’ dance, where the dreary atmosphere was far from dreamy. We went as friends, just friends, as dating was prohibited while attending *Beginning Experience* (BE), a recovery group for those grieving a relationship loss. We had met at BE and became instant friends. Chuck’s selfless acts and generosity revealed a kind heart. Because he is nineteen years my senior, I hadn’t considered him romantically—until that fateful evening when he swept me off my feet.

After our first dance, we wouldn’t dance with anyone else. Others tried to cut in unsuccessfully. This created a stir among our BE friends, giving the impression we were dating. How could I be falling for someone so soon and so quickly? I was too broken, too untrusting. Just hearing his voice filled me with great joy. We talked on the telephone into the wee hours of the morning. Despite our age difference, I fell hard and fast. Nothing else matters when you’re falling in love.

Can you remember how it feels to fall in love? How your stomach flip-flops at the sound of their voice, the touch of their hand, or just the thought of them? Time seems nonexistent when you’re with the one you love and like an eternity when you’re apart. You require less sleep, less food, less of everything except caffeine the next morning. When passion jumps into the driver’s seat, hang on, everything else flies out the window, including logic.

Even if it’s been awhile since you’ve experienced romantic love, it shouldn’t be difficult to stir up the emotion. God created us in his image, to love and be loved. God *is* love. This could be why defining love is massively complex. It’s like trying to define God. The Greek language uses at least four different words for love in comparison to our one English word. Love isn’t a concrete or tangible object either, such as a car or an elephant. It’s abstract and subjective, meaning how each person defines love may vary. For now, I want you to imagine fairy-tale love—the passionate kind that drove the Prince never to stop searching for Cinderella until he found her.

That, dear friend, is the love God has for *you*.

Jesus told several stories to demonstrate God’s love and passionate pursuit of us. One is about a shepherd who left his ninety-nine sheep to search for one lost sheep until he found it (see Luke 15:4–7). Another is about a prodigal son who left home and squandered his inheritance. When he returned, his father ran to him and welcomed him back by throwing a party (see Luke 15:11–31). Bible verses are sprinkled throughout this book describing God’s love for you. Maybe

About the Author

Kim A. Larson grew up in a Christian home and accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior at age twelve. But it wasn't until she experienced the indescribable love for her sons that she began to grasp the extravagant love God has for his children. Then through an unwanted divorce, her journey to trust God for her every need deepened. Today, she is convinced of God's goodness and his ability "to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20).

Kim has taught Sunday school, vacation Bible school, and led Bible studies and a single mom's ministry. It brings her great joy to share God's heart at Women's retreats, MOPs meetings, Mother-daughter programs or other Women's events. Kim is married to her best friend, Chuck, and has two grown sons, two stepchildren, twelve grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

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