

the beauty of grace

stories of God's love
from today's most popular writers

Dawn Camp,

EDITOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER



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Grand Rapids, Michigan

Dawn Camp, editor and photographer, *The Beauty of Grace*
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For Bryan,
who lets me dream big and believes in me.
You empower me.



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foreword

Dear Reader,

What you hold in your hands or see on your screen right now is an invitation. An opportunity to slow down for a moment, take a deep breath, and know what we all need to understand most: you're loved.

Yes, right where you are this moment. In the middle of your ordinary life, the God who created the universe is whispering to your heart, *I'm right here with you*. That's easy to forget, and what Dawn Camp has compiled for you on the pages that follow will help you remember.

You'll hear stories from women like you—women who have messy lives, hard questions, and busy schedules. They'll tell you how God found them at kitchen sinks and in carpool lines and so many other places they never expected Him to show up. You'll see photos that will remind you of the beauty and grace that can be found all around us if we're only looking.

What makes God's love so wondrous is that *He comes to us*. He came to the Garden of Eden to walk with Adam and Eve. He came to a manger to live with us and to the cross to die for us and be resurrected. He's coming again to take us home with Him forever one day. He could have kept His distance. He could have decided we were too messy. He could have said, "Figure out a way to get to where I am." But, no, love always finds a way to get to us and say to our hearts, *I'm here*.

Where do you need God's love to come to you in a new way? It might be in your relationships, or perhaps in your professional life. Maybe in the spiritual desert you find yourself stranded in lately. Wherever that place is for you, you'll find encouragement, comfort, and companionship in these pages. You don't have to feel alone. God is with you and your sisters are too.

I consider Dawn Camp a dear friend, encourager, talented photographer, and brilliant teacher. In other words, she knows how to help people see differently in life-changing ways. And she has created a book that will do exactly that for you.

So let your heart say yes to the invitation Dawn is offering you. With your eyes, your mind, and your heart, enter this space where you're wanted and loved, chosen and cherished, known and held dear. Rest for a while, friend . . . and reclaim the wonder of how much you're loved.

XOXO

Holley Gerth,
bestselling author of *You're Already Amazing*

acknowledgments

To Bryan: you never laugh at my dreams—no matter how crazy—and seem to think I’m capable of anything, like compiling this book. It’s amazing to live with that kind of support. You keep me on task when I get distracted and take me to the movies when I need a break. I couldn’t do without you.

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To the writers who contributed to this book: I cannot thank you enough for trusting me with your words and your hearts; this book wouldn’t exist without you. Some of you are old friends and some of us have never met; you can all consider me a cheerleader. I pray we impact many lives with this work.

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To Holley: thank you for believing in me and my God-sized dreams, standing beside me in hard places, and always listening. You're the best Words with Friends buddy a girl could have.

To Jesus: thank You for allowing me to gather the words on these pages together in one place—may it point its readers back to You. Thank You for the life and the family You've given me, for showing me secret places through my camera, and for the beauty of grace.

introduction

My eighteen-year-old son and I sit barstool to barstool, laptop to laptop at the kitchen counter, a twenty-first-century mother/son moment. He's buried in the usual—Avett Brothers videos and guitar tab charts—while I click over to check out a blog post about motherhood that has gone viral.

I'm in tears by the time I finish the first paragraph, laughing hysterically. My son shoots me a look and I shrug and say, "I must need a good laugh," but I think, *I must need a good cry too*. Tears are my default response to intense emotion, often triggered by written words. It's amazing how often the Lord sends me what I need—the right phrase, verse, or story—when I need it.

I don't think it's an accident that Jesus speaks to me through words on a page or on a screen or in a song. John 1:1 tells us, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,

and the Word was God.” Jesus is the Word. If He’s a God of words and *He lives in me*, then it’s no wonder the works of authors who seek to praise and honor Him resonate with me. Jesus Himself taught with parables: He understands the power of story.

Hebrews 12:2 calls Jesus the *author* and finisher of our faith. Together, He and I pen my story. Even when the plotline isn’t clear and I’m playing both protagonist and antagonist, my own worst enemy, I trust Him and He’s faithful. Once a week I teach British Literature to a class of tenth graders. I train them to separate characters into two categories: static, those whose personalities don’t change and who never learn from mistakes—or dynamic, those who grow in response to the demands and challenges of the narrative.

Without God’s grace and guidance, I’d remain a static character in the story of my life.

My mother once told me she worried about me, because for me, there’s truth in the saying, “You’re only as happy as your least happy child.” Life with eight children holds a wide spectrum of joy and sorrow, and a mama feels it all: the thrill of stealing a base, debating for the winning team, or shedding training wheels; the ache of being misunderstood by friends, getting hurt by the boy you never should have trusted in the first place, or dealing with hormones that turn you inside-out and crazy.

I don’t know how anyone makes it without faith and God’s sweet grace.

In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul asks God to remove the thorn in his flesh, the physical disability that hinders him, and the Lord tells him, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is

made perfect in weakness” (v. 9). Friend, no amount of brawn or bravery will sustain you; in fact, they fool you into trusting in your own power. Accept that you can’t do it alone—that you don’t even have to try—and rest in the gift of His amazing grace. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).

My Lord strengthens me when I miss my mother, when tears flow so thick I can’t breathe, when I don’t see the future. He holds me close when my sons grow up and leave, when my daughters think I’m the enemy, when I carry secrets that would break me alone. He loves my children more than I do—how can it be possible!—and I trust Him with their lives, their futures, their souls. He protects us from the unknown and the unimaginable and He rejoices when we rejoice.

While our roles in life are many and varied—wife, daughter, friend, mother, sister, coworker, church member, neighbor—our deepest relationship is with God. If we allow it to suffer, it affects the others. Sometimes He’s a father, sometimes an elder brother—and always a Spirit dwelling inside us, guiding. Always we’re invisibly connected, bound by heartstrings.

In Revelation 21:5 John says, “And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.” I like to imagine these words directed to me and all who seek to write truth, such as the stories told in the pages of this book. I pray they remind you of God’s love and provision amid the chaos of the everyday; that He cares for you in all circumstances; that no detail is too small and He’s numbered the very hairs of your head.

No matter your past or your future, the depth of your sin or the mistakes that you've made, the weariness of your soul or the obstacles in your path, you can experience God's love right here, right now, right where you are.

And that's *the beauty of grace*.

Blessings,
Dawn

purpose

To every thing there is a season,
and a time to every purpose under the heaven.

Ecclesiastes 3:1



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a man in a mirror

katie kenny phillips

He stood there, looking in the thrift store mirror. He was trying on a used suit. Out of date. Too big. I couldn't take my eyes off his left hand.

He stood, staring at the reflection. His left hand grabbed at the thrift store tag, keeping it from his mirror view, helping him get a glimpse of what could be. The suit didn't fit. But I think for some reason I knew it had to.

My friend and I were shopping—no real purpose, just perusing deals, but no deals really needed to be found. I recall finding a set of wooden salad bowls and declared right then and there that it would be my first purchase for my new life come graduation. I was moving to California to pursue an invisible thread that pulled at me, and these salad bowls marked the first tangible step in the many that would lead me there. Wooden salad bowls. A quarter apiece.

But this man, this man. He weighed that suit through his eyes and it cost plenty. He stood there for a disconcertingly

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long time, focused beyond the cloth that hung off his body. Something important was happening between those eyes and that mirror. Something. He held that tag in that left hand as a man might rattle dice before risking it all.

Our frivolity started to feel like an invasion of sacred space and I pulled away from my friend and I watched. I carried my bowls in my arms; he stretched out his to check the length of his sleeves.

We all came into that store for something. I have no idea what invisible thread he was pursuing or grabbing on to at that moment. For me, the bowls were a start of something exciting. An inexpensive gamble, a minor investment. Nothing, really, in the grand scheme of things.

For him, that suit—I couldn't help but think it meant more. The tag, hidden, didn't leave his hand. His eyes, focused, didn't leave the mirror. I wish I had done something important before I left—paid for his suit, left a few bills, something—but such is the clarity of looking backward. I didn't think of it at the time but I knew I was struck down, like a quick flash of lightning, by this man on a random Saturday. I also knew I didn't have any idea why.

My friend and I slowly left the store, me glancing over my shoulder, our simple purchases in bags. We moved on to the rest of our day in a city that beckoned us to be young and fun and carefree. But I quietly tucked the image of that man away, as if he were a secret just for me, a snapshot that would linger awhile.



20 Why do I still remember that man? Why does he still pull at my heart? Why, if I think of him hiding the thrift store

tag in his left hand while studying a suit that would never fit, do tears come to my eyes? Fifteen years later. A man from Milwaukee whom I never knew.

Why? Why? Why not?

We're given these snapshots for a reason, I believe. To learn. To see. To realize that this big world we live in is made up of individual people struggling, trying, growing, living. We are not just a group of anonymous breathing creatures that co-exist together, taking up our fair share of oxygen and soil. We are images of our Creator, beating hearts who love and lose, who buy salad bowls and try on suits. We are people who need jobs, who have failed, who have succeeded, who are trying to turn it around and are trying to point everything to Him.

We need to realize we are images of our Creator. We are meant to love Him and love others. We are meant to live with our eyes open. And it starts with looking at one person at a time. In our homes. In our neighborhoods. In our schools. In our thrift stores in Milwaukee. All this time later that man still holds sacred space in my head. I hope his suit served him well that day and every day after that, for whatever purpose held his gaze in that mirror.

He's one of my snapshots. An image, a blessing.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.

1 John 4:11

it's not about me

sara frankl

It's not about me.

That's what has been popping into my head a lot lately when people ask me questions about how I deal with being sick, why I don't get more frustrated, why I don't complain more or why I'm not angry about my situation.

We all want life to be fair. We want goodness to prevail and hard work to mean that life will be easier and . . . that green grass on the other side of the fence that belongs to the people who don't appreciate it? We'd like that to be transplanted into the lawn of the person who spends all day feeding and watering the sparse-looking grass in hopes of a fruitful harvest.

But all of that is “me” thinking . . . and it's not about me.

The plain and simple truth, if we take big lessons in life and strip them down to the bare essentials, is that we are tiny blips on a very big screen. Only God has the capacity to see all of it. He saw all that came before us and sees all that will

come after us, and only He can know the role that each of us can play that will best serve Him and each other.

So, my life isn't ideal by our standards. By my standards, it's getting less ideal by the year. That whole living in pain thing? I could do without it. The getting sick thing? Gets old really fast. The never leaving the house thing? I could think of some fun places to go. I miss fresh air. I miss singing at church. I miss dancing until I'm out of breath and riding in a boat so fast if you close your eyes you think you're flying.

But it's not about me. It's about what God can do with my life. I have learned a lot about myself, my faith, my perspective. But that doesn't mean I was given this illness to teach me something. For all I know, God saw this illness was going to be in my body and helped nurture me so that I could use it to affect someone else. And as much as I would like this disease to be gone when I wake up in the morning, if it serves a purpose for another person to see their life or relationship with God in a new light, then I wouldn't ask for it to be taken from me.

Because it's not about me. Nothing about my life is about me . . . it's about who He needs me to be. And how can I complain about that?

Oh, complaining can come so easily for all of us . . . your small house, your flat tire, the promotion that should have been yours, and the grass that grows so fast you don't have the time to mow it.

But what if the small house is so you are next to a neighbor who needs your help when her husband dies? Or your tire went flat when you were driving so it didn't happen when your teenage son was driving and he wouldn't have known what to do? Maybe the promotion would have been a dead

end for you and next year a better opportunity will be waiting. And that lawn? Maybe it's the only exercise you do each week and is saving you from a heart attack.

The point is, you don't know. I don't know. But it's not about me. It's about how God can use my life . . . so as far as I'm concerned, even those things that make me want to pull my hair out and scream "Why me?!?" are blessings in disguise. Blessings for me, or for someone else, or for a reason I can't even imagine.

But it doesn't really matter. Because it's not about me.

Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God.

Romans 12:1