

God

for

Us

*Discovering the Heart of the Father
through the Life of the Son*

ABBY ROSS HUTTO

God has gifted Abby Hutto with a powerful ability to write and teach in a way that makes his Word personal and boldly alive. While each chapter of this book has a different focus, you will be drawn into all the chapters because Abby is able to describe the many realities of our hearts. I realized that I needed not just one chapter, but each chapter. So take your time reading this book. Ponder how each different chapter might be applied to your heart. Then you will hear what Abby invites us to hear: the detailed and trustworthy way in which God calls each of us to himself—not once, but again and again.

—**Ruth Ann Batstone**, Counselor and Mentor; Author, *Moving On: Beyond Forgive and Forget*; Speaker And Discippler, Serge; Senior Staff Consultant, Parakaleo

God For Us is a unique book that will comfort, challenge, and compel you. As I read it, Hutto's insights from the gospel of John soaked deep down into my heart. There was comfort for the pain and insecurities I have experienced in my own journey of faith. I was challenged to once again remember that every single person I meet has a back story, which impacts who they are today. As the gospel also compels us to do, I am excited to keep growing in giving out rich truth woven with the merciful tenderness of Christ to people all around me and to the women who come to me for help. I commend this book to all who need help understanding our God's loving heart.

—**Ellen Dykas**, Women's Ministry Coordinator, Harvest USA

God for Us is a refreshingly honest look at how the challenges we face in life can overwhelm us and severely taint our view of God. With masterful grace and vulnerability, Abby draws us into these painful places and reveals how an embattled heart can find its

way back into the arms of a God who has always loved us deeply and without end. I will read and recommend this book many times over.

—**Kevin Heckathorn**, Pastor, Johnstown Presbyterian Church, Johnstown, Ohio; Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor, Directions Counseling

God for Us is an intimate portrait of Immanuel: God with us. Abby's genuine love for God's beloved boy Jesus Christ imprints every page. She reminds us that when God is for us (and he is!), the distant are drawn close, the captives are set free, and the shamed are shielded in his love!

—**Karen Hodge**, Coordinator of Women's Ministries, Presbyterian Church in America

Jesus's passion was to reveal his Father's heart to a longing and hurting creation. This book intuitively mines the treasures in the gospel of John that display the Father's heart through the ministry of Jesus. The author goes on to creatively document the display of that great heart in the lives of ordinary Christians as they encounter the living Lord Jesus today. As a Christian counselor, I believe that *God for Us* will be a powerful tool for helping to bring hurting hearts into a greater revelation of the heart of the Father who longs to heal them.

—**Emily Hughes**, Clinical Counselor, Potter's Hand Ministry; Care Pastor, Northside Fellowship Church, Westerville, Ohio

It has been my privilege and pleasure to be a firsthand witness as Abby's love affair with Jesus has grown and blossomed while I have worked side-by-side with her in the incubator (and sometimes the crucible) of ministry. Abby's intensive understanding

of John's gospel and her clear grasp of Scripture tied with people's real stories provide a compelling case that God is, indeed, for us.

—**Steve Resch**, Pastor, Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church,
Gahanna, Ohio

In reading, I saw. I saw myself full of weakness and woundings. I saw my misjudgments of God's character. But also, in this beautiful work, I saw the Son!

No one on earth has ever helped me more clearly see, hear, taste, smell, and touch the splendor of Jesus our Lord than this book has. In daring to write it, Abby has revealed the oft-misunderstood heart of the Father through our champion Big Brother! In reading, I saw; and my soul sighed, "Ahhh." Clearly, he is a God for *me . . . for you . . . for us!* Thank you, Abby!

—**Tami Resch**, Founder and Program Director, Parakaleo

This is the rare book that doesn't settle for the surface but connects the depths of our hearts to the profound and transformative love of God as revealed in John's gospel. Abby skillfully leads us to the One who meets us in our pain and longings—not as an enemy but as the friend who laid down his life to be God for us.

—**Jonathan Robson**, Associate Pastor, Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church, Gahanna, Ohio

These days, especially, it's refreshing to come across a book that is not only theologically sound but also emotionally compelling. This is such a book. Abby has done a magnificent job describing Jesus through the eyes of the man who called himself the "Beloved Disciple"—whom we know as the apostle John. Through her eyes and his, we discover a Savior who is *for* us as well as with us, and a love and grace that is there to be received by every kind of person.

I highly recommend this book for believers, doubters, and skeptics alike. Wherever you're coming from, there's something in here for you.

—**Scott Sauls**, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville; Author, *Befriend* and *Irresistible Faith*

God for Us is a beacon of hope for anyone who has ever wondered if God's love is enough. Abby Ross Hutto artfully draws the reader in through personal, relatable stories of failure and faith. I was captivated afresh by how the gospel is truly sufficient to meet our deepest needs. Hutto shows us that no sin, struggle, or fear is beyond the power of the gospel. She has created a resource that can uniquely and individually bless people from all walks and stages of life.

—**Sara Wallace**, Author, *For the Love of Discipline*

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through the Life of the Son*

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To my husband, Ken, who has been in my corner and on my side. You have narrated the Father's loving heart to me.

And to my children, Hannah and Harris, who have taught me the joy of living for someone other than myself.

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Introduction

Several years ago, I was standing outside my children's elementary school, waiting to pick them up at the end of the day, when I struck up a conversation with the dad beside me. As we chatted about our children, I made some general comment like, "Well, I guess God's plans are sometimes different from mine."

He laughed. "Yeah, that God is one sick dude."

I didn't know how to respond. Yes, I was caught off guard; but his comment also snagged at something that was hidden deep within my own heart. Despite what I knew of God, I wasn't sure how I felt about him. I knew the Bible told me that he is a God of love, but his plans often felt petty and cruel to me. I walked away from the conversation saddened by the cynicism in that man's heart and discouraged by my own lack of faith.

Intended for Courage

That conversation outside my children's elementary school caused me to look more carefully at the culture around me and

to ask some difficult questions of my own heart. The longer I looked, the more cynicism and fear I saw. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that almost a third of all adults in the United States suffer from pervasive anxiety.¹ In 2016, an estimated 16.2 million adults in the United States reported having had at least one major depressive episode during that calendar year.² People fear job loss, school violence, political unrest, and fighting in the streets. Anxious voices ask a myriad of questions: Are my elderly parents safe? How do I protect my children in this technological age? How will I provide for all that I need? Who will take care of me? Fear creeps in every corner. The world around us struggles to find hope, and its inhabitants battle confusion and discouragement.

I would love to say that as soon as someone becomes a Christian, this battle magically ends. However, a lifetime in the church and a decade in vocational ministry have taught me that Christians are just as prone to discouragement, fear, and anxiety as anyone else. To add to our tension, the most frequent command the Bible gives us is not “Be holy,” “Be obedient,” or even some variation on the Golden Rule. It’s “Do not be afraid”—which appears more than three hundred times!³ Because of this, many Christians feel discouraged and ashamed due to their constant battle with fear.

But no matter how we feel, God does not set us up for failure by calling us to reject fear and live courageously through sheer

1. See “Any Anxiety Disorder,” National Institute of Mental Health, last updated November 2017, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder.shtml>.

2. See the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (Rockville, MD: Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, 2017), 34.

3. See Edward T. Welch, *Running Scared: Fear, Worry, and the God of Rest* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2007), 59.

willpower. Two firm pillars of truth support his command: “Do not be afraid—because *I am your God* and *I am with you*” (see Gen. 26:24; Isa. 44:8; Jer. 1:8). Courage is rooted in the nature of God and the knowledge that he will never leave us; it’s not based on our feelings or our situation.

Where is God when we are afraid? The Bible tells us that he is in our corner and on our side.

Intention Colors Everything

Do you struggle to believe this? As Christians, we may not openly question God’s goodness or power, but doubt and fear are behind our cynical attitudes, self-protective behaviors, lack of obedience, and unwillingness to ask for our deepest desires. We act like we’ve forgotten that God is “able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20)! Instead of living in joyful expectancy, we dread disappointment. Our doubt and fear show up in the subtle ways that we anticipate hard circumstances—as if God won’t allow us to be too happy for too long. Have previous pregnancies gone well? Then we’re “due” for a miscarriage. Promoted at work? We hold our breath, as if our happiness puts a cosmic target on our back, and we wait for the other shoe to drop. And when bad things *do* happen, we mutter “I knew it” rather than “He is present with me in this.”

Is God good? Is he really for us? Or is he “one sick dude”?

One morning I read Psalm 139 to my children over breakfast. Tears filled my eyes as I spoke these precious words:

O LORD, you have examined my heart
and know everything about me.

You know when I sit down or stand up.

You know my thoughts even when I’m far away.

You see me when I travel

and when I rest at home.

You know everything I do. (vv. 1–3 NLT)

You go before me and follow me. (v. 5 NLT)

I can never escape from your Spirit!

I can never get away from your presence! (v. 7 NLT)

I could ask the darkness to hide me

and the light around me to become night—

but even in darkness I cannot hide from you.

To you the night shines as bright as day.

Darkness and light are the same to you. (vv. 11–12 NLT)

As I finished reading, I sat back and waited for my children to respond with the “Hallelujah” chorus. (Well, maybe a “That’s nice, Mom,” at least.) But they continued to chew, emotionless. I began to worry that they had completely checked out and not heard a word I had read. I was about to read the verses again when, through a mouthful of Cinnamon Toast Crunch, my son spoke up. “Sounds creepy. Like God is a stalker or something.”

How could a passage that brings such comfort to my heart read like the secret obsessions of a creeper to my kids? I tried a different approach. Earlier that week, the kids and I had discussed news about a serial killer in Florida. Knowing that this question would pique their interest, I asked, “What if a serial killer came to our house and said, ‘I know when you lie down. I know when you wake up. I see everything you do. *I know everything there is to know about you.*’ What would you feel? You should feel afraid and call the police! Why? *Because you know his intention.*” (To “serial kill” you, as my son so eloquently put it!)

But what if you heard those words in a different context? Suppose you were ill and a top specialist sat across from you and

said, “I have reviewed your charts. I’ve gone over your diet and sleeping logs. I know all the medications you are taking. I’ve taken a complete health history, and *I know everything there is to know about you.*” You’d feel relieved and hopeful. Why? *Because the specialist intends to cure you.*

Same words, different intentions. Intention colors everything.

The Intentions of God

We struggle to believe that God is in our corner because we are unsure about his intentions. That’s why I’m so drawn to the gospel of John. John opens his gospel by telling us that God knew that we were confused about him. He saw that our hearts rebelled against him because we had misjudged his character. But instead of punishing us, God came down to speak to us in the simplest of terms. God the Father spoke through God the Son.

John recorded Jesus’s life so that we might believe in Jesus and in the Father who sent him (see John 5:24; 20:31). God doesn’t want us to just know facts about him. He wants us to know the intentions of his heart so that we will draw near to him. Jesus displays the heart of God for all to see. Jesus “puts flesh” on the Father for us. He stoops to our level and explains what the Father is like in ways we can understand.

In this book, we’ll look at thirteen stories from John’s gospel that reveal the heart of the Father to us through Christ. I have paired these Scripture studies with the true stories of people I have known who struggled to believe that God is who he claims to be. Somewhere in these stories, I hope you will see a reflection of your own heart and will take that opportunity to ask yourself some difficult questions about your view of God. Through these pages, I pray you will allow Jesus to take you by the hand and lead you to his Father and will listen as he narrates

Introduction

his Father's heart for you. In Jesus, we see God for who he truly is. I pray you will see that the Father is not apathetic or cruel. He is not against us.

He is a God for us.

1

A God for the Distant

JOHN 1:1–18

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (John 1:14, 18)

Distant's Distrusting Heart

Distant grew up in a Christian home with faithful Christian parents. She knew and loved Jesus, but there was a tension in Distant's heart. When she looked out at the world, she saw great harm. She saw sorrow that she couldn't understand and pain that she couldn't explain. Her family firmly believed in a powerful and sovereign God who controlled all circumstances. If God was so powerful, Distant wondered, why didn't he stop this? She knew that God was capable of saving, but sometimes he didn't seem very willing.

So, at an early age, Distant came to the only conclusion that seemed plausible: If God chooses not to rescue us, it must be our fault. God must be angry with us. His sovereignty became a source of great fear to her rather than comfort, and without necessarily realizing it Distant began working to keep this volatile God happy.

While she was in middle school, two of Distant's family members became very sick. Distant took a tentative step of faith toward God. She prayed fervently, begging God to restore their health. He chose differently. When both her relatives died, something broke inside her heart. She still believed that God might be good to others, but Distant no longer expected him to be good to her. She wouldn't outwardly blame God for the pain and sorrow around her, but she no longer trusted him. From now on, she would have to look out for herself.

Like many who fear hardship, Distant wanted to avoid pain at all cost. Her solution was to obey the rules perfectly. As a young adult, she studied God's Word so as not to miss any rules by accident and make God angry with her. She filled her time with good things. She volunteered, served, led Bible studies, and disciplined younger girls. Anyone who observed her would praise the young woman she had become. What no one else saw was the inner turmoil of her soul. Insecurity constantly plagued her thoughts. She frequently compared herself to other Christians around her to grade how she was doing. She rode an emotional roller coaster that was dependent on her performance. She loved Jesus and wanted to please him, but she feared the judgment of the Father.

Distant lived like this for many years. She got married, had children, and even found her calling to vocational ministry. Her love for Jesus grew, but her feelings about the Father remained conflicted. He seemed hot and cold. Loving and angry. Consuming Fire and Abba Father, all at the same time. A hard man.

Distant settled into a “business” relationship with God. She worked for him, but she didn’t know him. She lived in constant fear of being scrutinized and disciplined, as if God were a harsh and overbearing boss. If things were going well, she supposed that God was happy with her. If they were not, she assumed that she had done something wrong and was being punished. She was easily unsettled. Afraid to go to God for help and ashamed to confess her fear to others, Distant drifted farther and farther from the everlasting arms that could keep her secure.

Does this sound familiar? Do you believe that God is angry with you? Have you ever joined Distant on that roller coaster of joy and despair? Do you hold your breath in anticipation of judgment? It’s an exhausting way to live! You can’t enjoy the good gifts in life if you’re waiting for disaster. You can’t hope for the future if you don’t trust the God who holds the future in his hands. And what is life without joy or hope?

If, as we saw in the introduction, our understanding of God’s heart toward us colors everything, then a misunderstanding of it will destroy our equilibrium. If, like Distant, we view God as a hard man, then our lives will lurch to and fro with every changing circumstance. Our world will become marked by anxiety, fear, depression, and despair. Suspicion will create isolation that will drive us from everyone—including God. We need the security that comes from knowing that someone is looking out for us and will stand by us, no matter what. We need someone who scans the horizon to search for us while we are far away. We need someone who cares enough to bring us home.

We need a God for the distant.

The Distant Hearts of the Children of God

When I was growing up, my favorite movies were the Star Wars trilogy (which I now have to distinguish as Episodes IV–VI

. . . sheesh). I loved the opening shot: a dark screen with words scrolling into the horizon, accentuated by the first notes of the iconic theme song. That intro covered a ton of backstory in a matter of seconds, and millions of viewers became caught up in the middle of a war between the Empire and the Rebellion.

The gospel of John opens in a similar fashion. John's powerful prose spans the entirety of history. "In the beginning was the Word," he writes, and the Word created the world. Then the Word became flesh and lived among us. We've jumped into the story at the climax of the action. What is the backstory? What led up to this Word entering into human history?

To understand John's prologue, we must go back to the opening lines of Genesis: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). God ushers us into a story in which he reveals himself as he carries out his mission to rescue and save. It is a story in which we turn and run away from God, but also in which his loving heart compels him to come looking for us.

The story opens with the first humans, Adam and Eve, who live in a close and loving relationship with their Creator. But the story quickly turns, as God's children defy him and reject his rule over them.

As the plot unfolds, God never gives up on his rebellious people. He preserves the human race using Noah's family and an ark. Through a man called Abraham, he creates a nation that will bless the world. God then rescues that nation from slavery through Moses, a Hebrew slave turned Egyptian prince. He leads his nation of Israel into the land that he promised them and fights their enemies through warriors and judges whose names you may know: Joshua, Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and more. If you grew up in the church, you probably heard their stories as you munched on stale animal crackers in Sunday school.

Why did God's people constantly need to be rescued? Because they were always running away from home! God's people felt a

tension in their souls. They knew that God was powerful and that they needed him, but they mistrusted him because they misunderstood his character and nature. And so the themes of rebellion and rescue continued through their history—the stories of their faithless kings, their prophets' warnings, and their exile and slavery. Because God's people left him to chase after other gods, they ended up in a perpetual cycle of miserable slavery. Every time they were oppressed, they cried out to God to rescue them, and he did.

Throughout these hundreds of years of Old Testament history, God is consistently faithful and true to his promises. His people are not. With every rebellion and rejection, they grow more distant from him. The Old Testament closes with the fulfillment of a prophecy that is spoken through the prophet Amos. From the beginning, God has spoken to his people. Now that will change. Because his people refuse to listen, God sends his silence (see Amos 8:11). Four hundred years of it!

The people despair. It seems that God has finally given up on them. But the silence is not ultimately a rejection but a gift. It allows them to experience the distance that their sin has put between them and God. The silence clears the way for God's voice to be heard once again—but not through another prophet or king. It is through his own Son.

What happens during those silent years? Only one page separates the books of Malachi and Matthew, but a lot occurs between the Old and New Testaments. Empires rise and fall, and one nation after another rules over Israel. A lot happens in the hearts of God's people as well. They misjudge him. Much like Distant, they know him to be a hard man, and they fear him. Their fear drives them to look out for themselves.

So, in the silence, they cling tightly to what they do have: the law. They embrace it—not as a way to understand God's heart and repent of their rebellious ways, but as a way to save themselves.

They build rules and systems based on the law to keep order in their lives, but their hearts are far from God. They are God's official covenant people, but they are not living as his children. Just like Distant, they work for God in a business relationship, but they don't understand him.

For four hundred years they wait for God to speak. But their hearts are so distant from him that when he does finally speak through his Son, they fail to recognize his voice.

The Word Becomes Flesh

This sets the stage for the gospel of John: God's silence and the distant hearts of his people. Despite their misunderstanding and their false assumptions, the gospel of John doesn't start with declarations of punishment or a God who withdraws from his people. It begins with his Word. God speaks to us through a person—his Son. This is the climax of the great story God is telling: the Word becomes flesh and lives among us!

Even while we were distant from God, God sent Jesus to explain himself to us. In an amazing act of love, he came . . . not as the consuming fire of the Old Testament but as a helpless baby boy—an explanation of himself with whom his people could eat, walk, laugh, and cry; an explanation whom they could touch and draw near to. In the incarnation, we see God's "divine capacities restrained."¹ Jesus set aside his incredible glory and became like us. He spoke in words that we could understand, narrating the invisible God for us in a familiar setting.

Because of Jesus, we can better understand the character of the invisible Father. Theologian William Barclay explains it this way: "If the word was with God before time began, if God's word

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 62.

is part of the eternal scheme of things, it means that *God was always like Jesus*. Sometimes we tend to think of God as stern and avenging; and we tend to think that something Jesus did changed God's anger into love and altered his attitude to human beings. The New Testament knows nothing of that idea. The whole New Testament tells us . . . that God has always been like Jesus."²

As we read the Gospels, we find that the "Word made flesh" is surprisingly relatable. Jesus is not at all like the subject of popular religious art—a man staring placidly into the horizon, disconnected from the world around him. His life looks a lot like ours! He had parents who made mistakes and unkind siblings who criticized him. He got hungry. He got tired after a long day. He was tempted. He felt grief and cried real tears. He laughed. If you read the Gospels closely enough, I'm pretty sure you will see that Jesus has a sense of humor. God communicates to us through someone who we can relate to and know—a real person with thoughts, emotions, desires, and a will.

By coming to know Jesus, we come to know the Father as he truly is. In fact, Jesus completely revolutionizes our understanding of the Father! Those who think of God as "one sick dude" would have trouble applying that description to Jesus. Endearing stories reveal how safe he seemed—people wanted to come near to him! All throughout the Gospels, the disenfranchised, the poor, the hurting, the outcasts, and the sick are irresistibly drawn to Jesus. In one incident, parents bring their babies to Jesus so he will lay his hands on them and bless them (see Matt. 19:13–15; Mark 10:13–16; Luke 18:15–17). The disciples assume that Jesus is too important to be bothered by these little ones, but Jesus corrects his disciples, scoops the children into his arms, and blesses them. This does not sound like a frightening man!

2. William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 1:44.

It's not that Jesus is the nicest member of the Trinity. I love how J. I. Packer puts it: "The idea that the kind Son changed the mind of His unkind Father by offering Himself in place of sinful man is no part of the gospel message."³ Our creeds, confessions, and catechisms remind us that the three persons of the Trinity make up one God. They are of one substance, each like the other. Though we cannot fully comprehend this mystery, we can be certain of one thing: Jesus is the image of the invisible God (see Col. 1:15). Jesus is God narrated for us, telling us what the Father is like.

The Intentions of the Father on Display

John wrote his gospel for a specific purpose: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). It is vital for us to see that Jesus is the Savior of the world, but it is just as important for us to see that the Savior is someone's *child*—the Father's beloved Son.

I remember the first time that this concept moved from being a fact in my head to being a truth in my heart. At a candlelight service one Christmas Eve, as the congregation sang "Silent Night," I looked over at my children. As I watched the candlelight flicker across their chubby little faces, my heart ached. How deeply I love these two children! I wondered what that night had been like for the heavenly Father, as he watched his only Son struggle to be born into a world that would reject him, hurt him, and ultimately hang him on a cross to die. If a sword was to pierce the soul of Mary his mother (see Luke 2:35), in her limited understanding, how much more did the Father, who knew all things, ache as he watched his Son suffer over the years?

3. Packer, *Knowing God*, 185.

John tells us that before Jesus came to earth, he was at the Father's side (see John 1:18). The Greek literally says that he was "in the bosom of the Father."⁴ The bosom of God is a place of intimacy, knowledge, and security. The Son was as close to the Father as a child whose dad scoops him up and holds him close to his heart. They shared an intimacy that we can only imagine. Their love was pure and perfect—complete.

This verse describes their loving relationship, but it goes on to tell us something confounding. The Father sent his only Son away from his lap, away from the security of his love, to a world that wasn't safe—that wouldn't know him. The Son willingly, knowingly entered into a world that would reject, abuse, and kill him. Pastor and theologian Bruce Milne puts it beautifully: "It is as if God has reached into his very being and plucked out his own heart in sending Christ to us."⁵

Why would God do this? Why would he willingly suffer? *Because he aches for us.* He longs to pull us close to his heart. For those like Distant, who view God as remote, as always a little angry and waiting for us to make a mistake, the life of Jesus proves that nothing could be further from the truth. God initiated our rescue plan—not us. God paid the dearest price for our salvation when he sent his most precious treasure into a world that would hate him—all for love. The Son entered into our world to save the wayward children of the Father—all for love. This is how much God loves his distant children.

The Father longs to hold us nestled against his chest. If you too are a distant child, know that the Father's heart yearns for you. There is a place of safety for you on the Father's lap, near his heart. He has sent his Son to come and find you and lead you home.

4. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 135.

5. Bruce Milne, *The Message of John*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 50.

Distant Comes Home

God has never been content for his people to remain far from him. This is as true today as it was back then. God wouldn't let Distant stay far away, either. One day, while Distant listened to a sermon on the parable of the talents (see Matt. 25:14–30), the Holy Spirit broke through to her. It was as if he gently held up a mirror so that she could see her heart toward God.

In the parable, a master entrusts three servants with money to manage in his absence. Two servants invest their money wisely, but the third servant digs a hole and hides his money until the master's return. When questioned, the servant responds, "Master, *I knew you to be a hard man*, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid" (Matt. 25:24–25). This servant is described as "wicked"—not because of his bad financial sense but because the master had given him every reason to trust him, and yet the servant chose to see him as a cruel slave driver.

As she listened to the sermon, Distant faced the lies she had adopted as truth. She saw herself in the wicked servant and was convicted to the deepest part of her soul. For so many years she had chosen to view the Father as cruel. She had used the circumstances of her life and the painful "evidence" around her to judge his character. Her incorrect "knowledge" of God had skewed everything. Because Distant did not understand God, she was living as a prisoner to fear. But, because of his great love for her, God gave her a chance to see him differently, to repent, and to turn away from her false assumptions and be set free.

Although I identify with many characters in this book, I have begun with my own story. I was this distant child of God. Like Israel, I had misunderstood God's heart and formed a whole way of life based on that misunderstanding. By the time that I recognized it, I had thirty years of ruts in my heart—distrust and doubt

were embedded in my soul. Fear is a thorough teacher, and her lessons are not easily unlearned. Change would be long and difficult, and I would need the Father's help. I didn't know where to start. How do you learn to trust when you've spent a lifetime protecting yourself? The answer had to be in Scripture.

I embarked on a study of the book of John, because the first chapter kept tugging at my heart. I knew that I had belonged to God and even worked for him for years, but I didn't know him. My misunderstanding had put distance between us. So I spent a year looking at the life of Jesus, asking him to tell me what his Father is like. In every chapter in the gospel of John, Jesus paints a picture of the invisible Father. As I gazed at that portrait, slowly but surely my heart began to soften. God bridged the distance between us.

One day, while I was studying the crucifixion, something shifted inside me. I knew that my heart finally belonged completely to God. The Father had sent his Son to come and get me, to bring me back home, so that I could sit on his lap near his heart. In his great kindness, the Father had been pulling down the strongholds of fear and doubt in my heart, boulder by boulder. The trust that I had broken, he is restoring.

I begin with my story because it is a common one. I became a Christian when I was five years old, but I didn't begin to know God *as he truly is* until I was thirty years old. If you feel distant from God, you are not alone. Many people are afraid of God, or uncomfortable with him, so they never draw close enough to hear the voice of Jesus. Jesus challenges the caricatures of his Father: a God who is either terrifyingly controlling in his anger or benign, complacent, and impotent in his love. Jesus is a robust and complex God who is able to handle any and all of our questions and struggles. The world needs to see this God displayed in him.

I wish I could say that studying the book of John cured me of anxiety, but that is not the case. Fear is constantly at my heels,

tempting me to grow distant again. But I now know the cost of distance, and I will not willingly return to a stale and cold relationship with the Father. His nearness has become precious to me. His constant care is the delight of my heart. His love is slowly but surely driving out my fear. In the moments when distancing myself from him feels easier, an old hymn resonates with my soul:

Come home, come home;
You who are weary come home;
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,
Calling, O sinner, come home!⁶

I find myself singing these words often, because they remind me that Jesus is always calling my name and taking my face in his hands to turn my heart back toward the Father. Jesus, clothed in flesh, proves that the Father's heart is safe for me.

He is a God for the distant.

Scripture for Contemplation

Psalm 139

Isaiah 49:14–16

Hebrews 2:14–15

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Start by reading John 1:1–18.

1. What parts of Distant's story are most relatable to you?
What parts feel less familiar?

6. Will Lamartine Thompson, "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling," 1880.

2. “You can’t hope for the future if you don’t trust the God who holds the future in his hands.” How does fear lead to distance from God? What fears keep you distant from God?
3. Has God ever used silence in your life to bring you closer to him?
4. Think about humanity’s relationship to God’s law. What mistakes do we make with it? How might we try to use God’s law in a self-reliant, self-saving way?
5. Read Hebrews 2:14–15. Why is the humanity of Jesus so important to us? What does it mean for you in particular?
6. On page 21, the author lists some characteristics of Jesus that show him to be “surprisingly relatable.” Can you think of other examples? Are any of these particularly encouraging to you right now? Why?
7. Read Psalm 139. Is it creepy, comforting, or something else? What does your answer say about your view of God’s intentions toward you?
8. Read Isaiah 49:14–16. What do these verses tell you about the heart of the Father toward you?
9. What misunderstandings may you have about God?
10. What truths must you believe about God in order to come home?

