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# EVERYTHING

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**Stephanie Ehmke**

*What If God Wants  
More Than Your Heart?*

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*To my husband and best friend, Todd,  
and our incredible children, Sydney, and Cody.  
You were each worth fighting for and I love you.  
Thank you for trusting me with sharing our families' story so openly.*

*To my dear sister-in-Christ, Ida.  
Thank you for paying attention to God's nudge  
to remind me it was time to write this book.*

*To my tribe: Laura, Renae, Sydney, Dena,  
Stephanie, Tara, Ida, and Susan.  
Thank you for reading, encouraging, and praying me through this endeavor.  
The journey has been sweeter knowing I wasn't alone on it.*

*Special acknowledgment to my daughter, Sydney.  
I couldn't have finished this book without you.  
There is nothing more humbling and holy than having you pray over me  
on the many occasions when I thought I couldn't move forward.*

*And finally, Todd, thank you for daily living  
out a story of redemption with me so others might see Jesus.*

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# Introduction

“What does God want from me?”

These six little words have flowed through my mind off and on in various forms for the past twenty years of following Jesus. Sometimes they are inquisitive, truly wondering, “What’s next?” on this journey through life. But most of the time, if I’m honest, probably 95 percent of the time, these words flow from a place of irritation and confusion. Life events have just not matched what I expected when I gave my life to Jesus. Maybe you can relate.

I’ll be the first to admit that I am nowhere near perfect or the standard of holiness I see Jesus calling his followers to in Scripture, but I do try, and isn’t that what counts? I’ve tried with all my heart and soul to live a life that honors God and follows where he leads. Still, at times, life has felt like one big never-ending assault on my soul. Don’t misunderstand, I love my life, and there have been some truly beautiful seasons that I wouldn’t trade for anything. I just confess that in some moments I find myself wondering, “Is it too much to ask for a little help and protection from God?” I mean, c’mon, “What does God want from me?”

The truth is, there is a crucial aspect of the Christian life that no one seems to talk much about when we are first getting to know Jesus. It is, however, one that is vitally important if we who follow him are to live the life of freedom for which he has called us. Without this knowledge, the brokenness of this life, the hatred in our world, and the assaults of the enemy will be misconstrued and we will blame God, missing out on the intimacy and connection we so vitally need to endure those hard times.

Additionally, it will be hard to keep grounded in the seasons when life is good as these are times when, in our humanness, it is so easy to forget how much we need God.

So what is it? What is this crucial aspect of the Christian life that we so desperately need to be told that no one seems to talk about when it comes to following Jesus?

He...wants...*everything*.

Yes, he wants our hearts as soon as we come to him in faith, believing in his work of salvation on our behalf, but this is only the beginning. It's what marks the start of the life-long journey God has for us to come into the fullness of who he made us to be. For those of us who choose to fully enter in, it will be the wildest adventure we could ever take, full of ups, downs, twists, and turns. We will experience the highest highs of mountaintop experiences with God and the lowest of lows in the valleys of sorrow with him. And it will be worth it, all of it, but it will cost us...everything.

In Matthew 16:24–25 (NIV), Jesus tells his disciples, *“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 will find it.”*

There is so much more to these verses than a simple reading implies. It's not about denying ourselves the things we enjoy. In taking up our cross, we are taking on the mission of Christ, and choosing to deny ourselves “everything” that distracts from his purpose and glory being fulfilled in our lives. If we live solely for ourselves, our wants, needs, thoughts, desires, and purposes we may have a good life, a great life even, but lose the life God has for us to experience with him. But if we choose to surrender “everything” on the surface, losing what the world believes will bring happiness, we will truly find a life with God that exceeds all expectations.

It sounds good, doesn't it?

My guess is, at this point, some of you may be thinking, “Yes, yes, it does. This is the life with Jesus that I want. How do I get more of him?” Great! This tells me you've experienced enough of Jesus to know life with him is worth it. So keep reading because I believe there is more for you in what I have to share. For others, this may be

a really difficult concept to grasp and one that's even harder to consider. You may be thinking, “Why? Why would anyone surrender everything in their lives to a God they can't even see? Isn't my faith, allegiance, and commitment to try and be a good person enough?” If your thoughts are somewhere in this camp, I understand and have been where you are in my own journey. Please, keep reading because I believe there is more here for you too.

The truth is, there is a reason why this aspect of the Christian life is not talked about much in our early days of faith. Simply put, it's not just hard to embrace the idea of surrendering everything to Jesus; it's impossible to do on our own. Early in our faith, we are not ready for such lofty notions. Surrendering our hearts was a big enough step.

Jesus is such a gentleman. He knows our human frailty and when we are ready to go deeper. When the time is right, he will begin to seek more of our trust in every area of life, but graciously, not all at once. In those seasons, he will not make us surrender that which we hold so dear. No, surrender and trust are always our choices and he will honor what we choose. Our decision will simply pull us closer to him or keep us at a distance.

Let me be clear about something, though. Jesus does not want everything from us because he is an egotistical narcissist, not by any stretch. His purposes, unlike ours, are always pure, and his only desire is to have a place in our hearts above everything, the place that only he deserves. Anything in our lives that becomes more important, an idol or something we trust in above him, he will ask for us to surrender so that we may enjoy the fullness of life with him.

Again, it is not easy, but it is worth it.

There are many who may believe as an ordained pastor and licensed professional Christian counselor that I have to take this stance. I mean, isn't that what I'm paid to do, to help people trust God more? Yes, of course, there is truth to this thought, but on the pages that follow, you will not read the words of a pastor or counselor. What you will experience, with much rawness, is my life as a woman who loves Jesus and how he has one by one asked for

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everything I've held dear and trusted in above him—my heart, my past, my pain, my marriage, my career, my pride, my children, my security, my aspirations, my ministry, and many, many more things. I will share honestly, the pain, the wrestling, the confusion, and the outcomes in the hope that you will find the strength to trust God in whatever season you may find yourself.

Even more so, I hope you will find on these pages that Jesus's desire for everything is bound to his heart to redeem every single part of our stories. The broken parts we choke to speak about and the beautiful parts we want to rely upon. All of it, all of who we are as individuals, Jesus wants to embrace and make pure for his glory and for our good.

Jesus has asked for everything from me and with trembling hands, clenched throat, and tear-filled eyes I have given it; quite imperfectly, but willingly. My prayer is that you may find the encouragement from my story to do so as well.

He is worth it.

## *Part 1*

# EVERYTHING BROKEN

*My days have passed, my plans are shattered.*

—Job 17:11 (NIV)

*My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart you,  
God, will not despise.*

—Psalm 51:17 (NIV)

# Shattered

*Much-Afraid, do you love me enough to  
accept the postponement and the apparent  
contradiction of the promise, and to go  
down there with me into the desert?*

—Hannah Hurnard,  
*Hinds' Feet on High Places*

*It was the moment that changed everything about my faith and the way I live, though at the time I didn't know it. There I sat, all alone in my car for nearly two hours in the parking lot of the Burger King across the street from my subdivision. It was a brutally cold, windy February morning in Missouri with gusts of wind so strong they rattled my SUV. Everyone driving by appeared to be in such a hurry to get on with the day. No one knew my life had just been shattered. Everything I trusted had been shaken, turned completely upside down, and yet no one even seemed to notice me slumped over the steering wheel, crying so hard I could barely breathe. Every now and then the tears would stop for a moment and I'd try to drink some coffee, now lukewarm at best, but mostly I would stare out the windshield in a daze. There was no in-between, either a torrential downpour of tears or dazed confusion. This was how I spent the morning that forever changed the trajectory of my life and what I believed about faith, hope, and Jesus. This was the moment when I was invited by God to begin surrendering...everything.*

Everything that had happened in the previous twelve hours felt like a complete contradiction of what God had been leading me to hope and believe over the past several months. Instead of being “sheltered under his wings” as the psalmist declares (Ps. 91:4 NET), I felt like I’d been punched in the gut and thrown into a ditch. I had dared to hope in Jesus for a different life, one full of joy and happiness, and instead what God seemed to allow was unimaginable pain and heartache. To say I didn’t understand would be a horrendous understatement.

It had only been about a year and a half since I had completely given my heart back to Jesus. I had asked him to be my Savior at age twelve, but early on (for reasons I’ll explain later) made the choice I didn’t need him. However, at the age of twenty-seven, I desperately saw with absolute clarity my need for him to lead my life and surrendered my heart fully back to him, not only as my Savior but also as my Lord.

Initially, I found relief in the surrender. I had made a mess of my life to this point and no longer wanted or needed the responsibility of being in control. I was certain my newfound love and dedication to Jesus would bring the peace for which my heart ached. Turns out that was not the case as my constant companion during this season was confusion.

On the surface, my life appeared perfect. My family looked like we had achieved the much sought-after American Dream. My husband Todd and I had been high school sweethearts and were now in our seventh year of marriage with two children, a boy and a girl. We lived in a nice neighborhood on the corner lot of bustling cul-de-sac, and each drove a shiny new car. We both had great full-time jobs, extended families that loved our children and us well, yet something was terribly wrong. We had everything the world says should make us happy, but we were miserable.

Faith had not seemed to work out for me when I was younger, but even though I had walked away from God as a teenager, I had grown up in a solid, Christ-centered church and now believed (maybe out of desperation) that Jesus was the missing piece for me. I also truly believed he was the missing piece for my family as well.

The problem was, the closer I got to Jesus during that season, the worse my marriage and family became. It didn’t make any sense to me.

In all fairness to my husband, prior to our marriage, there was very little about my life that would have indicated Jesus held any kind of significance to me or that I had any kind of faith. I remember giving Todd a Bible our senior year of high school and talking about matters of faith occasionally, but other than that, nothing in my life resembled a heart that was following Jesus. Absolutely nothing.

So when I now decided to shift my life back in the direction of Jesus, I moved carefully, treading lightly in those early months when I began to reengage church and matters of faith. While I was very intentional during that time about talking with Todd about my reignited faith, I was also very careful not to come across as “too religious” or make it appear like I was trying to convert him. I wanted him to figure out where Jesus fit into his life on his own. Still, an apparent hostility grew in him toward my faith, as it became more of a priority for me.

I wouldn’t say I went overboard by any means. The extent of my relationship with Jesus during this time was simply Sunday morning church and reading my Bible through the week (which I only did when he wasn’t home). The one time I brought the Bible to read in bed you’d have thought I put an open fire on the comforter. Something about these small steps seemed to distance Todd from me. We began fighting regularly about silly things, but more specifically, about me taking the kids to church every Sunday morning. In his eyes, since he typically worked six days a week, I was breaking up our family on the one day we could all be together. I would invite him to attend with us, but that was only met with rolled eyes and cranky words.

It was during this season of life that the events of 9-11 forever changed our world. While we were not directly affected by the events of that day, the eternal questions that so many wrestled with about where God was during such tragedies began to weigh heavily on Todd. Questions came to the surface in many of our conversa-



tions about the purpose and meaning of human life and why we are here at all. I did my best, with my limited knowledge at the time, to share what I knew, but my attempts to console him were continually met with sarcasm and rejection. One evening, after a particularly hard day of work, I remember Todd yelling through angry tears, “What is the purpose of all of this? And don’t give me any of that b—— s—— about God and purpose. You live, you die, and then you’re worm food.”

That night crushed me as I saw the profound depths of Todd’s hopelessness while feeling powerless to do anything about it.

The next few months, I would continue to see a rapid decline in our marriage and family. Daily, I was begging God to show up and reveal himself to Todd, asking for him to save our family, but no positive change came. The only noticeably consistent change during this time was that of Todd pulling slowly away from me and the kids.

He worked all the time, usually somewhere between seventy to eighty hours, six days per week. Because he was gone so much, I took on most of the daily responsibilities of running the home and taking care of our two children. The times when we did get to spend together as a family were especially tense as Todd could feel the distance between himself and the kids. They were little at the time, ages three and seven, getting up late and going to bed early, which meant Todd was usually gone before they woke and home late after they’d already gone to bed.

I witnessed the toll this was taking on our family when Todd told our son Cody, then three years old, he loved him before bed one Sunday evening as they sat on the couch together. Cody looked at him and said nothing. The protective mama bear within me sensed danger, so quickly I rose up, whisking Cody off to bed before Todd could say anything. Upon returning, Todd was in a rage, fuming, “How can my own son not tell me he loves me!”

My only response was to simply say, “Sweetie, you’re never here, and he just doesn’t know you.” This was not the answer he wanted to hear, so he just shook his head in disbelief and walked away.

Fast on the heels of this event, Todd pulled even further away by deciding to buy an old house to remodel and flip about forty-five minutes away from our home. For the next few months, he would spend most of his time outside of work there. The endeavor was cloaked in words about investing for our future, but deep down, I knew it was just an excuse not to be with us. There were times when we as a family engaged in work on the house together, but for the most part, this was Todd’s way to hide from us.

For me, the one positive thing during this season was how my heart was falling more and more in love with Jesus. Daily, I was soaking up every book, every radio show, every sermon I could get my hands on about doing life with him. My young, naive heart mused, “If I am this committed to my faith, surely my Savior won’t let my family fall apart. At some point, he is going to intervene.” I wasn’t sure if I truly believed these thoughts or if I was just desperately trying to convince myself.



During this time, one of the radio shows I would regularly listen to on my way to work in the mornings was *Focus on the Family*. For the most part, I always found the broadcasts helpful and encouraging, but there was one day in particular that rocked my world and messed with my brain for several weeks. I don’t remember specifically the name of the woman who shared her story, but I do remember how it profoundly affected me.

The short version is this woman came to know Jesus as her Savior at eighteen years of age and, not long after, was carjacked and sexually assaulted. She shared the trauma and devastation, but also about forgiveness and love (yes, I said *love*) for her attacker. I replayed her story over and over in my head for weeks and finally came to one logical conclusion. I could never love Jesus like that, not in that way.

I struggled greatly with this thought because I knew I was basically putting up a wall in my blossoming relationship with Jesus. I was letting him know, clearly, our relationship could only go so far.

Something deep inside of me knew this was wrong thinking, but I also knew I wasn't capable of the kind of love and forgiveness the woman on the radio displayed for her attacker simply because she was a follower of Jesus.

The question lingered heavily in the air around me: "How does one build a relationship with Jesus when you're telling him you can only trust him so far?"

As things at home continued to rapidly deteriorate, this woman's story plagued my thoughts daily. How could she love Jesus that way? How could she trust him after what happened? Why would she trust him and why couldn't I just let it go? And what, if anything, did her story have to do with me and what was going on in my life?

No concrete answers came, but I soon found myself wading in Scripture, for the first time ever, into the book of Job. As I read of Job and his commitment to God in the midst of unimaginable tragedy, my mind kept wandering back to the woman on the radio. Both she and Job had fully given their hearts to God and look at what happened to them; what God allowed to enter their lives? She had been sexually assaulted; and Job had lost his wealth, his children, his health, his friends' respect, and even his wife told him to curse God and die (Job 1–2). These were not glowing invitations for trusting in God's faithfulness and I wondered, "Were these people crazy?"

Increasing doubt and confusion came as I encountered Job at the end of the book giving praise and glory to God through his tragedy. It was one thing to endure the pain and suffering, but to actually praise God for it seemed ridiculous. Again, I wondered, "Am I missing something?"



Desperation is an interesting thing, leading us to do things we would otherwise believe inconceivable. After months of watching my marriage and family slowly falling apart, coupled with reading Job and the story from the woman on the radio rattling around in

my head, I finally succumbed to the overwhelming desperation I felt about my life. I dared to do the unthinkable. I dared to hope Jesus could help and that God would intervene.

I rationalized for a long time how this might happen but, of course, came up empty. The only thought I had was, "Surely it can't get as bad as Job." It was in that moment I took the step that would forever change the course of my existence. One Monday morning, about 5:00 a.m., in the silence before anyone arrived at work, I got down on my knees in my office, hands on the floor in front of me to steady my shaking body, and prayed what I believe to be the scariest prayer a person can ever pray. "Okay, Lord, whatever you have to do to save my family, do it."

When I said the words, I meant them, but honestly had no idea what I was really praying. All I knew was I was desperate for God's help, whatever that might look like.

Roughly three weeks from the day I prayed that prayer, Todd would come home and confess to having an affair with a woman at work. I was devastated.

There are no words to describe the sucker punch in the gut I felt by Todd and God that evening. I had not seen this coming and truthfully felt betrayed by both. But whose betrayal was worse? Todd had broken our marriage vows, but we both willingly entered into those. God had been enticing me to this place of hope and surrender my whole life, and this is how he rewards me? He gets me to pray for "whatever" from his lofty throne and then destroys me?

This event was the single most defining moment of my life to that point, shattering everything I trusted and held dear to my heart—my marriage, my family, my faith, my identity, my idea of hope, and my relationship with Jesus. In one fell swoop, the Creator allowed all my illusions to be completely shattered.

At the time, I had no idea the view of these things I held so dear was wrong or the places of prominence they had in my life were so off-balance until they all came crumbling down around me. But as I sat there in the Burger King parking lot, only twelve hours after everything had been shattered, the invitation from Jesus came

to live in truth rather than illusion and to actually engage the hope for which my heart so longed.

But could I? And even if I thought I possibly could find hope, was I willing to accept the invitation to trust Jesus with what I held most dear and surrender the outcomes to him after all that had happened?

Though I didn't know it at the time, this was my invitation to begin surrendering everything, starting with my marriage, to God in the hopes that his son, Jesus, would sustain me regardless of the end result. My choice would mark the beginning of an entirely new way of living with Jesus and I had no idea that this one decision would eventually lead to a life of surrendering...*everything*.

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# *Abandoning God*

*The story of your life is the story of the  
long and brutal assault on your heart  
by the one who knows what you  
could be and fears it.*

—John Eldredge,  
*Waking the Dead*

*I had already abandoned God once. How had I allowed myself to get sucked back into the idea of trusting this invisible God, only to be hurt again? The first time I was just a child, so I can give myself some leniency for that mistake, but this time, I was a rational, intelligent adult with a fully formed brain. How had I been so stupid?*

*A familiar mantra I'd heard growing up chimed in my ears. "Hurt me once, shame on you. Hurt me twice, shame on me." (Deep, guttural sigh.) Yes, shame on me indeed.*



I grew up in a small town in rural Missouri. It was the kind of town where nothing much ever really happened, and everyone seemed to know each other and their business. Growing up in a town like this, it felt like there were only two extremes—you were either super religious, engulfing yourself in church life or you

## About the Author



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