"Only those who have suffered are truly able to understand the suffering of others. And only those who have experienced God's grace and healing are capable of sharing it with those who need it most. Shelly and Wanda have written a beautiful, honest, and gut-wrenching book, bringing beauty from the ashes of their own personally painful stories."

**—KATHIE LEE GIFFORD**, Cohost of the fourth hour of the *Today Show* 

"This book is a gift. In over twenty years of women's ministry, I have met a lot of hurting women who have needed a resource like this. I'm thrilled to be able to offer them the rich truth found on these pages."

—JILL SAVAGE, CEO of Hearts at Home, author of nine books including *Real Moms . . . Real Jesus* and *No More Perfect Moms* 

"One of the worst feelings in the world is the feeling of being all alone, carrying a secret you fear no one would understand. *Love Letters from the Edge* assures us that we are not alone; God understands. Let this book voice for you the unspoken pain that runs silent and deep. And then in its pages hear the tender and comforting replies of the Father who wants each of us to know that we are cherished and adored."

-STEVE SILER. Founder and director of Music for the Soul

"Love Letters from the Edge is a welcome addition to the spiritual journey of healing. Let us pray that many will experience the gift within these pages."

—DR. ALVEDA C. KING, Executive director of African American Outreach, Priests for Life

"The authors have experienced what it's like to fall into the dark places in life, and they have used their healing to minister to thousands of hurting women. More than just meditations, Shelly and Wanda offer practical guidance and encouragement, and subtly whisper, 'Open yourself to God's healing—as we did."

—CECIL MURPHEY, author or coauthor of 135 books, including 90 Minutes in Heaven and Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story

"With startling and intimate conversations with God, you will think Shelly Beach and Wanda Sanchez have been eavesdropping on your most secret thoughts. They describe the pain, fear, shame, and regret we all feel at times and all the ways we try to hide. But this powerful book brings hope for despair. God himself supplies a healing balm through the tender words and gentle assurances found in Scripture. You'll be equipped with practical steps to move from hopelessness, fear, and doubt to live in the reality of God's restoration and healing hope. This is a powerful book you will share with many."

—NANCY STAFFORD, Actress, speaker, and author of The Wonder of His Love: A Journey into the Heart of God and Beauty by the Book: Seeing Yourself as God Sees You

"This is a must-read for anyone who has ever been hurt or suffered traumatic loss. Not only do Sanchez and Beach share hard truths with depth and compassion, but as survivors of tremendous pain in their own journeys, they deliver a message of hope with authenticity and empathy unlike any other. In this book, they have bravely combined their tremendous talents to help heal other wounded spirits and soothe even the deepest scars.

—JULIE CANTRELL, New York Times and USA TODAY best-selling author of Into the Free and When Mountains Move

"Each person's journey is unique, but one thing's for sure—this book can provide one form of that much-needed loving support . . . Sure to touch the hearts of the hurting and to promote healing in their lives."

—GRACE FOX, National codirector of International Messengers

Canada and author of Moving from Fear to Freedom:

A Woman's Guide to Peace in Every Situation

"The inspirational words in *Love Letters from the Edge* touch the deepest wounds in a broken woman's heart and demonstrate God's unconditional love and healing for His daughters."

—MEL & ANNIE GOEBEL, Founder-CEO and president of Daughters of Destiny, www.daughtersofdestiny.org

"The honesty with which the authors approach difficult situations comes only from those who have walked through deep waters. Time after time I was moved to tears followed by an overwhelming sense of God's presence as the authors move into words of assurance from the heavenly Father. This is a book I will read often and share with the women who come to Dégagé in the midst of life's storms and struggles. There is no greater gift to give someone than the gift of hope in a heavenly Father who loves them unconditionally."

-MARGE PALMERLEE, Executive director of Dégagé Ministries

"Through a balanced message of truth and grace Shelley and Wanda have created an invaluable gift for those who have experienced significant trauma, disappointment, and loss. The reader will gain notable insights into the impact of trauma, helpful tools that will enable those affected by trauma to regain emotional and relational health, and wise counsel about how the development of one's spiritual life can help turn tragedy into triumph over time."

—SAM BEALS, President and CEO of Wedgewood Christian Services

"Shelly Beach and Wanda Sanchez, out of their own painful journeys, have made it abundantly clear that God is available for hurting people. Love Letters from the Edge will pull us back from the edge when we wonder if God really cares about the deep struggles we're going through. To some degree, we've all been dangerously close to that edge of wondering if there's hope. Whether that time of life is called brokenness, trauma, or pain, we've all been there. These two authors affirm clearly that God is near and keeps His promise to never forsake or abandon us. I'm so glad this is available."

—KATHY COLLARD MILLER, speaker and author of many books, including *Partly Cloudy with Scattered Worries* 

"Love Letters from the Edge is poignant, gripping, and soul stirring. This book is a must-read for survivors of abuse and trauma who feel like God abandoned them. The authors insightfully allow readers to discover the many ways God has walked with them through a painful

journey. Because the authors have experienced trauma, abuse, and abandonment, they write with perceptive understanding of the journey of healing."

—Dr. BETH ROBINSON, Professor of counseling, Lubbock Christian University

"Love Letters from the Edge is a gift to all who struggle with the brokenness of life. The authors understand our pain. They give truth and hope as they help us know we're never alone in the valley of suffering and trauma."

—GARY HEIM, Pastor, author, and counselor

"Love Letters from the Edge contains some of the most wise, frank, and courageous prayers you will ever read. Those who've survived trauma, abuse, or the pain of loss will recognize their own emotions, struggles, and questions mirrored in the words of this book. But this is not a one-way heaven-aimed monologue. Shelly Beach and Wanda Sanchez invite survivors into a two-way conversation with the Lord of love. . . . The kind of love letter that can speak into the deepest crevices of a hurting heart. Highly recommended."

-MICHELLE VAN LOON, author of If Only: Letting Go of Regret

# LOVE LETTERS from the EDGE

MEDITATIONS for THOSE STRUGGLING with BROKENNESS, TRAUMA, and the PAIN of LIFE

SHELLY BEACH and WANDA SANCHEZ



Love Letters from the Edge: Meditations for Those Struggling with Brokenness, Trauma, and the Pain of Life

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To my dad,
Who taught me to love God, truth, and family,
and what it looks like to live gratefully.
—Shelly Beach

To Grandma, thank you for everything, and to Auntie Emily, my hero, who taught me to dream and to love books and words.

—Wanda Sanchez

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Introduction / 15 How to Use This Book / 19

#### Heart Cries

Where were you, God?

# Week 1 I see you and know you.

Where Were You? /23

Innocence RIP /26

Weeping in the Night /29

White Knights and Other Fairy Tales /32

A Place Called Desperation /35

Weekend Feature: El Roi, God Sees Me / 38

# Week 2 I cradle you in my arms.

Invisible / 4.3

When the Sun Goes Dark /46

No More Strength /49

Hiding the Hurt /52

Living in the Empty /55

Weekend Feature: Blessing Our Children / 58

#### Week 3 I comfort you.

Things That Go Bump in the Night /62

Falling Apart /65

The Movie Screen of My Mind / 68

The Ragged Edge of Hopelessness /71

Here I Am Again /74

Weekend Feature: Mending the Memories /77

#### Week 4 I remember you.

Standing at the Window /81

War Zones / 84

God of Dark Places /87

No More Pretending /90

A Long Way Off /93

Weekend Feature: Abba Father, The God Who Comes

Running /96

## Grieving and Growing

Will it ever be better, God?

# Week 5 I restore you.

Longing for Home / 101

Tattered Hope / 104

The Asterisk / 107

Betrayal / 110

Releasing the Death Grip / 113

Weekend Feature: Speaking Truth to Broken Places / 116

#### Week 6 I bless you with the power to forgive.

Daddy's Girl / 120

The Longest Ride / 123
When the Ring Comes Off / 126
The Brown Robe / 129
The Sound of the Closing Door / 132
Weekend Feature: Forgiving Ourselves / 136

#### Week 7 I secure you in my love.

Just One More Time / 140
Safe / 143
The Food Feud / 146
Fighting the Feelings / 149
No Place to Run / 152
Weekend Feature: El Olam, Eternal God / 155

#### Week 8 I accept you.

God of Safe Places / 158

Boiled Frogs / 161

The Battered Heart / 164

Skeletons in the Closet / 167

The Hardest Thing to Ask / 170

Weekend Feature: Building Altars / 173

# Hope and a Future

Can you redeem this pain, God?

## Week 9 I send gifts that renew you.

The Man Who Hung the Moon / 179
Binder of the Broken / 182
Scattered Jewels / 185
Rehabs and Redemption / 189

The Hope Bucket / 192

Weekend Feature: Giving Our Suffering to God / 195

#### Week 10 I bless you with power to release the past.

Blood on My Hands / 199

Forgiving Bert /202

Choking on the Words / 205

Carry Me /208

Empty Arms /211

Weekend Feature: Preparing to Release the Past / 214

#### Love and Assurance

Can you say it again, God?

#### Week 11 I promise to love you forever.

Relentless Pursuit / 221

Daddy's Heart / 224

Living Free /227

I Don't Blame You /230

Speaking Truth to Your Inner Parts / 233

Weekend Feature: Counting on God's Unfailing Love /236

#### Week 12 I promise you a hope and a future.

Unthinkable Grief, Unfathomable Hope / 240

Face Time / 243

You Are Not Forgotten / 246

Mine for Eternity / 248

Leaving and Letting /251

Weekend Feature: Remaining Rooted in Hope and Truth /254

Appendix 1:	PTSD 101 / 257
Appendix 2:	PTSD Assessment Tests and First Steps / 266
Appendix 3:	Resources / 269
Appendix 4:	How to Help Your Medical Provider Understand
	PTSD / 276
Appendix 5:	Suggestions for Friends, Spouses, and the Church / 278
Appendix 6:	Scriptural Affirmations / 281
Appendix 7:	Forgiveness and Restoration / 288

Acknowledgments / 291
About the Authors / 295

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Adversity introduces a man to himself.

UNKNOWN

Not long ago, my friend Wanda and I threw a party for Christian women in leadership from across the nation. We invited award-winning authors, filmmakers, speakers, agents, and people in Christian media to come and network about influencing culture for God's kingdom.

As Wanda and I surveyed our friends that evening, we noted one overwhelming characteristic. The vast majority of the women had experienced life-changing trauma at some point: sexual abuse, domestic violence, rape, arson, family suicide, even the attempted murder of a family member and murder of a child. Other women had lost loved ones in tragic accidents, experienced medical trauma, or had been touched by other life-altering tragedies.

Of the sixteen women at the event, at least five (31%) were suffering from or at one time had suffered from severe and ongoing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). At least four others (25%) had experienced PTSD symptoms that had made it difficult to cope with life for more than a year. Simple math told us that trauma and the aftereffects of PTSD had dramatically influenced more than 50 percent of the women in the room. Including us, the authors of this book.

When I was nineteen years old, I (Shelly) was attacked by the most

prolific serial rapist in a tristate area. His assault forever changed my life, and while that experience was horrifically painful, God used it to teach me things about himself that radically changed my view of my purpose in life and my relationship to the world. My dear friend and coauthor Wanda Sanchez was placed in a broken county juvenile system when her young parents were incarcerated. Abuse ravaged her life, and for years she struggled with the symptoms of PTSD. But Wanda's mother and father came to know Jesus in prison, and today Wanda's family relationships are healed.

To the uninformed, it might appear that our friends and Wanda and I have led unusually traumatic lives; however, the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) reports that nearly one in five women in the United States have been raped, one in four have been the victim of physical violence by an intimate partner, and one out of six women have been stalked.¹ Of the women present at our gathering, 44 percent had been sexually abused. According to a study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, one in four girls (25%) are sexually abused by the age of eighteen, and one in six boys (16%) are sexually abused by the age of eighteen.² Interestingly, at least 25 percent of the women gathered for our event had been sexually abused before the age of eighteen. Additionally, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence reports that one in

M. C. Black et al., "National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 Summary Report," National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, November 2011, http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs\_executive \_summary-a.pdf.

<sup>2.</sup> S. R. Dube et al., "Long-Term Consequences of Childhood Sexual Abuse by Gender of Victim," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 28, no. 5 (June 2005): 430–38, http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed /15894146?dopt=Abstract.

four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime.<sup>3</sup> Again, 25 percent of our group of friends—Christian women in positions of leadership—had experienced domestic violence.

Chances are that whoever you are, you or someone you know and love has been affected by trauma—the yucky, painful "junk" of life. If that person is you, those experiences have very likely taken you to deep places of suffering and loss. It's also likely you've seldom, if ever, spoken to others about the depth of your pain, your sense of isolation, and your feelings of abandonment.

You may have been hurt—victimized—at the hands of others. Perhaps once. Perhaps many times. The pain of those traumas cuts deeply into your soul and often leaves lifetime scars.

Unfortunately, those who experience trauma often don't understand that the deeply painful experiences that overwhelm us produce biological and chemical consequences as well as spiritual and emotional consequences. One's body chemistry does not end at the neck, and the same chemicals that influence the liver, kidneys, and heart also influence cells and blood vessels in the brain. Trauma creates lasting and profound symptoms defined as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Unfortunately, people often wrongly think that PTSD affects only combat veterans or those who have experienced mass disasters like 9/11.

They're wrong. The effects of trauma can have lasting and lifelong effects on those who have experienced invasive or early childhood medical procedures, the separation of adoption, domestic violence, sexual abuse, devastating accidents, the death of loved ones, natural disasters, and other painful losses. Traumatologist Margaret Vasquez,

<sup>3. &</sup>quot;Domestic Violence Facts," National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, accessed October 1, 2013, http://www.ncadv.org/files/Domestic ViolenceFactSheet%28National%29.pdf.

certified trauma therapist and certified intensive trauma therapy instructor with Kairos Trauma Consultants, defines trauma as any event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. Perhaps you have become overwhelmed by the spiritual, emotional, and physical consequences of traumatic events in your life because you don't know where to turn.

We know your struggle. We know the face of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, confusion, and desperation because those struggles have been our own. We are here to tell you that even in the depths of your deepest despair, God hears your cries, and you have reason to hope.

Over the past several years, Wanda and I have traveled tens of thousands of miles across the nation and spoken to women in churches both large and small, as well as at prisons, hospitals, and mental health facilities. No matter where we speak, the needs of women are the same: they need hope in despair and to know that there is healing for their brokenness. The devotionals in this book reflect the stories of hundreds of these women, as well as our own.

This book of meditations is different from many others. It's written from two perspectives. The first half of each entry is a letter from the brokenhearted to her Father God. The second half is God's love letter of response to his wounded child who has been hurt by sexual abuse, violence, abandonment, victimization, or other painful life issues. It's our prayer that *Love Letters from the Edge* will become a message of consolation, comfort, and hope on your journey to healing—a message of love from God's heart to yours.

—Shelly Beach and Wanda Sanchez

# How to Use This Book

Love Letters from the Edge is a twelve-week book of meditations designed to help you express your questions and frustrations to God and to better understand his heart for you. The book also offers tools that give you an overview of post-traumatic stress disorder. Activities include journaling questions, letter writing, art projects, and other activities designed to help you move toward healing and deepen your relationship with God.

The appendixes at the back of the book include information that will help you better understand and access helpful information on PTSD and its symptoms. We've included websites, assessment tests, treatment centers, Scripture affirmations, and suggestions for friends, spouses, and the church, as well as other resources.

As the authors of this book, we must state that we're not therapists. If you're experiencing symptoms that can accompany trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder—depression, suicidal thoughts, self-abuse, or other mental health issues—we encourage you to consult a mental health professional. Reading about and writing about your memories and experiences can be potential triggers for trauma symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, or self-harm.

We encourage you to purchase a writing journal and an art notebook and to complete as many of the activities as you feel are appropriate to your needs. If you are working with a counselor or therapist, be sure to consult them about the activities you undertake.

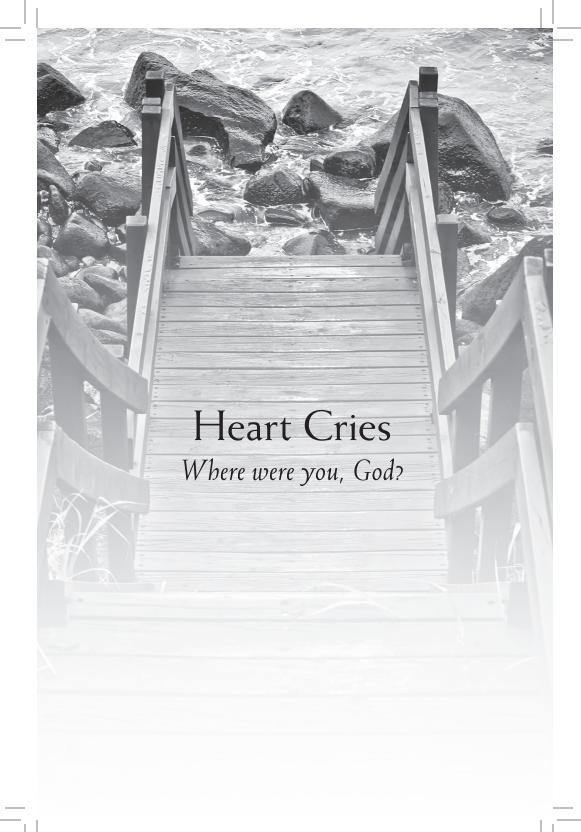
If you suspect you have PTSD and have never sought treatment from a traumatologist, we suggest you prayerfully seek the help of a professional qualified in treating the psychological aspects of trauma that influence the processing functions of the brain. Trauma treatment is vastly different from counseling, and addresses the biological wiring that is altered when traumatic experiences overwhelm the brain. It is important to remember that all truth belongs to God, and a division between "secular" and "sacred" is a false division. PTSD influences the body, mind, and spirit, and a comprehensive treatment plan should integrate the best medical treatment with biblical truth.

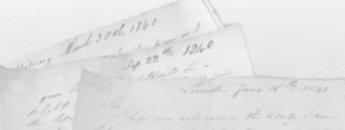
You are about to embark on a spiritual journey of discovery and change. Expect opposition. Satan does not want you to find freedom. He does not want you to be well. We encourage you to ask close friends and loved ones to pray for you and we encourage you to find a trusted, discerning companion for your journey.

Be encouraged with this truth: God loves you more passionately than you could ever comprehend. He has come for you, and he will never leave you—no matter what your emotions may tell you or where life may find you.

He gave what he loved most to rescue you: his Son.

In this very moment, he is whispering to you: *Come to me. You are loved.* 





# WEEK ONE

# I see you and know you.

My Precious One, I am close to the brokenhearted and save the crushed in spirit.

—YOUR FATHER FROM PSALM 34:18

# Where Were You?

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous.

Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.

JOSHUA 1:9 ESV

## God,

When I was a little girl, someone told me it was wrong to get mad at you, or to ask you questions. But that doesn't make sense to me.

Since you're God, I figure you must know everything I'm thinking and feeling, when things are good or when they're awful. And if you're truly a father who loves me in the good times and in the bad, you want me to bring you my tough questions because I don't need you very much for the easy ones.

So where were you, God, when all the horrible things in life were happening to me? Where were you in the moments when I felt abandoned and alone? I prayed a thousand times for the torture to stop, but the nightmare happened over and over, again and again until my heart shriveled up inside of me and my prayers stuck in my throat.

I waited for you to rescue me. I prayed and I prayed, but the hurt kept coming. As the years passed, I tried to keep believing you cared.

With one wave of your finger, you parted the Red Sea for the children of Israel. But you didn't come for me.

You saved Daniel in the lions' den. But you didn't save me.

You freed Paul from his prison cell. But you didn't free me.

Where were you, God? Wasn't I important enough? Was I just too bad—the one person who wasn't worth it? Other people I loved suffered, too. I did everything I could to protect them and sacrifice myself so they wouldn't suffer.

For years I prayed you'd send someone to rescue me—to rescue us. Even in the years when I tried to convince myself you weren't there

or were a monster who didn't care, I never really stopped asking you to come.

Will you come for me now?



#### My Beloved Child,

It's all right if you have questions. I understand why the world doesn't make sense to you, and I understand your anger, rage, and pain. I have never taken my eyes off you for an instant. But as you come to know me better, you will understand that trying to understand answers beyond your comprehension is less important than trusting my character.

I want nothing more than for my children to be whole and well, but the world you live in is sick. Earthly wholeness is impossible. The pain and torture you experienced were caused by the sinful actions of humans exercising their choice and free will. And although I did not override their choices, I was with you, and you have been rescued in ways you cannot see and often look beyond.

Rescue is not always taking out and taking away. Rescue also comes in gifts of presence, endurance, transcendence, and purpose.

You didn't see me. You didn't hear me. And you didn't feel me in

every moment of pain. But I was always beside you, holding you close to my heart, loving you, and wiping away every tear.

Know that I promise justice, although in this life you will not see the final pages of that chapter written.

I love you with a pure love that exceeds the limits of earthly understanding. Don't give up, my daughter. Healing and wholeness are available to you and are being written into your story even now.

I came for you, and I have never left your side. Reach out, and you will find me here.

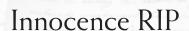
#### Hope on the Edge

When have you asked God to rescue you? Did God's silence ever feel like abandonment to you? How did you handle those feelings?

How have you reconciled faith in a loving, sovereign God with the hurt you've experienced in your life?

#### Heart Cry

Dear Father, help me believe I'm not without hope, that I'm not unloved, that I'm not abandoned. Help me see who you really are and that my pain does not define your love. Help me understand that answers will never be enough and that your love and character alone are all I can trust in—no matter what I may feel.



Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.

**MATTHEW 19:14** 

Dear God,

In three notes, a song on the radio takes me hostage, and in a heartbeat, I'm thrown onto the roller coaster of sad-and-angry-and-terrified-and-sad.

Up and down, feelings fly as I'm tossed around turns of memory. I'm back *there*—reliving the childhood nightmare. The moment I give in to the surge of sadness, my stomach drops, and the rush of rage comes—rage that I was robbed.

But not just robbed. My innocence and childhood were stolen. Triggers, flashbacks, and nightmares own my life. And whenever I tiptoe up to the memory and think about the moment my world changed forever and part of me died, my spirit shatters into a million pieces.

Empty. Afraid.
Hopeless.
Used.
Angry. Forgotten.

Abandoned.

I'm sad that part of me disappeared and so few people ever mourned for the lost and empty child. I'm sad beyond words for the precious, irretrievable things that were stolen: A sense of protection and safety. The knowledge that I'm seen and heard. The feeling that I'm loved and wanted. The ability to trust. The confidence to love myself.

Those things were ripped from my hands like they were never mine. Will I ever get over the anger and sadness for their loss, for the death of my childhood?

You are God over all things, and I pray you can use something in this mess for good I can't see. But tonight, please hold the shattered child in me whose heart still cries for lost things.



#### Dearest Child of Mine,

As your Father, I treasure the trust you place in me when you share your heart—especially your doubts and fears. Yes, I know you hurt deeply, my child, and I carry your wounds inside my own heart. Although you have not always felt it, I have carried you through your deepest pain.

Even though it's difficult for you to trust what you cannot see, I can promise that I am using the tangled mess of your life in ways you cannot imagine. The glory that will come from the pain will ripple out into the scope of history for generations to come. Although you do not see it, your faith is breaking the chains of bondage in your family and setting free those you will not meet until eternity. In spite of all the things that have happened to you, overwhelming victory is yours through Jesus.

You're right, my daughter—your innocence was stolen, and those responsible will face me. But I will restore more than was taken from

you and sow blessing into your future. Jesus came to restore your innocence and give you back your childhood. Rest assured, my child, no matter what you may feel, you are wrapped in my love, and you walk in heaven-bought innocence and purity. The full life that you desire exists as you live and breathe and find your being in Jesus.

Do not be troubled or afraid. I give power to the weak and strength to the powerless. Find new strength in me.

#### Hope on the Edge

What things have you lost that have brought you to "the edge" in life? How have you dealt with those losses?

What things are you asking God to restore? Can you envision ways that God can use your pain for blessing? How?

#### Heart Cry

Help me grieve what was lost. Give me a vision for who I am and the identity and inheritance that are mine through Jesus. My innocence is not lost, because Jesus bought it for me when he defeated sin. Thank you for giving back the things that were taken. Teach me to love like you love, God, and to see myself as the redeemed, beautiful daughter that you see.