



PART ONE

THE PAST







# 1

## DEEP ROOTS

### *Finding Your Significance in Christ*

The television blared in the background of an otherwise quiet home. I was only nine years old and not yet a Christ-follower. My hardworking single mother sat on her bed paying bills, her anxious sighs slipping beneath her door and into the living room with each check she wrote. My older brother, distant from me in both years and emotional connection, was out with his friends, and I sat alone on the couch. I longed to watch *Kids Incorporated* on the Disney Channel, but cable television was one of many luxuries we could not afford. Bored with the news, I made my way up the stairs to my bedroom, but I stopped after just a few steps. The news anchor was reporting on children and divorce. Immediately my ears perked up.

*The reporter is talking about me,* I thought.

He churned out the latest research and some dismal statistics on the high school dropout rate of children from “broken homes.” His words struck my heart with a chill. That was the moment I realized I was broken . . . flawed . . . second-class . . . insignificant.

I stood paralyzed on the steps, seething at the bleak future this news anchor had just assigned to me. My fighting spirit refused to accept his prophecy. (Being a strong-willed child does have its advantages, so hang in there mamas of tenacious two-year-olds.) *That won't happen to me,* I remember thinking, my anger boiling within.

*I will not be a statistic!* With that final resolution, I stomped up the stairs to my room.

I've heard and read these kinds of statistics all my life; maybe you have too. If not, let me summarize the popular view for you. Children from divorced families are more likely to do the following:

- Develop health problems
- Have trouble getting along with their peers
- Be more aggressive toward their peers
- Drop out of high school
- End up in prison as adults
- Engage in sexual activity at a young age
- Use drugs and alcohol at a young age
- Grow up to fear conflict
- Commit suicide during their teen years
- Experience teen pregnancy
- Suffer from depression both in childhood and adulthood

Fortunately, my feisty spirit—and God's grace—served me well in life. I avoided those grisly statistics and graduated from high school, college, and seminary. I made plenty of mistakes in my life, but I did not fall into the temptations of alcohol, drugs, or sex as the news anchor had predicted. God protected me from a grim future and opened doors for me that, according to the statistics, had already been shut, thanks to my family history.

Most importantly, when the world told me I was second-string, God told me I was significant.

No matter how many times we fail, no matter how many times our past disappoints us or points a finger at us, our God defies statistics so that the world may see us the way He sees us—as the child He adopted into His family. Nothing could give us more significance than knowing God chose us and loves us with an unchanging love.

### It's a Wonderful Life—Really

My favorite Christmas movie is *Elf*, starring Will Ferrell. I know it won't win any major film awards, but there is something endearing about a man who

ventures to the Big Apple in search of his father at Christmastime. Not to mention I agree with his four food groups (candy, candy canes, candy corn, and syrup), I envy his ability to feel rested after only forty minutes of sleep, and I admire his ability to decorate for Christmas in one night.

While *Elf* is my favorite, I am clearly in the minority. It turns out that *It's a Wonderful Life* ranks among people's top five favorite Christmas movies. I think most people love the film because they identify with the main character, George Bailey. While I find the movie a bit depressing, I do identify with one thing in *It's a Wonderful Life*: like Bailey, I want to know that I matter, that I am significant. And I don't think I am alone. I believe most people want others to notice them. (Which explains why they post selfies on Facebook and pictures of the perfect pot roast they cooked on Pinterest.) We all want to know that our tiny lives make a big difference in this giant world.

Unfortunately, sometimes life overwhelms us. At one point in the movie, Bailey feels so desperate and depressed that he contemplates suicide. Many people from dysfunctional families can relate to Bailey. As I mentioned earlier, kids from divorced homes are more likely than kids from relationally stable homes to commit suicide. Sometimes these feelings of hopelessness don't go away later in life. In fact, Dr. Esme Fuller-Thomson, a professor at the University of Toronto, conducted a study on this very topic. She found that when most other major life factors remained constant, parental divorce increased the likelihood of suicide attempt by 14 percent.<sup>1</sup>

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What circumstances in your life have caused you to feel hopeless or helpless? How have you dealt with those feelings?

Many of us struggle with our sense of significance because we grew up looking at ourselves through our parents' eyes or the world's eyes instead of through Jesus's eyes. As the reporter implied when I was in the fourth grade, the world sees us as damaged goods destined to repeat the same mistakes deeply rooted in each of our family trees. But God sees us as new branches, ready to stretch and grow to provide shade for the weary. He sees us as useful branches, ready to produce tasty fruit for the hungry. He sees us as lovely branches, ready to provide beautiful blossoms that bring hope, truth, joy, and splendor into the dark world. My prayer for you is that you would embrace this significance and claim your godly identity as you start each day.

*Tara* ☼ I was always so insecure and so worried about doing things the “right” way. In those early years of finding my way, it was so tempting to compare myself to others and feel inadequate. I wish I had been more relaxed and able to enjoy those years instead of being so concerned with getting to the next step.

Trees have historically symbolized strength and identity. Yet many of our family trees looked more like withered, dead plants. God can bring our family trees back to life and strengthen what is weak. It's time for us to reject the Enemy's lies and embrace God's truth. We need to uproot memories that keep us buried in the dry, dead soil of insignificance and accept the truth that we, like George Bailey, matter in this life.

In the Old Testament God told His people, “I am your Creator. You were in my care even before you were born. Israel, don't be terrified! You are my chosen servant, my very favorite” (Isa. 44:2 CEV). God is your creator too. You were in His care before you were even born. Do you understand the magnitude of this? He cares for you desperately, passionately, and lovingly because He has been caring for you before you made your debut into this drafty, wide open world. No matter your family tree or the mistakes that have been made, you matter to Him.

*Natalie* ☼ Insecurity pretty much wreaks havoc on any and all situations in marriage, and I was incredibly insecure in the be-

ginning. It was difficult for me to believe I was acceptable and good enough for someone like my husband to marry. I think most women, not just me, need a lot of reassurance. And this doesn't make us needy or clingy. It's just how we're wired.

## The Trouble with Transactional Prayer

Almost everyone enjoys memories of Santa Claus. Well, everyone except terrified toddlers. Taking pictures with Santa is a rite of passage though, so parents happily place their screaming children on Santa's knee and shout, "Say cheese!"

As a child, I pictured God akin to Santa Claus: I told both of them what I wanted, and I expected each to deliver. Clearly my theology needed a little work.

While I was growing up, my family rarely attended church; we were Christmas and Easter pew warmers. At nine years old, I had no real relationship with Jesus, yet I remember praying for two things: (1) A dad. Any dad. I wasn't picky. And (2) health for my aunt.

My Aunt Patty fought a losing battle with cancer during most of my young life. I prayed for her every night with my hands folded tightly and my eyes squeezed shut. I thought missing even one night of prayer meant God would refuse my requests, so I prayed more fervently the next night and tacked on a little confession. Again, I had major holes in my theology.

Time passed, and I still had no dad. Then my Aunt Patty lost her battle with cancer at the age of forty-two, leaving behind a husband and two children. *Clearly*, I thought, *God is either not listening or He's not there*. I held up my end of the bargain by praying, but God did not answer my prayers. He failed me. So I stopped praying. I checked out spiritually. You might have checked out too, but rest assured God is always checked in. He doesn't step away from us, ignore us, or give up on us (Deut. 31:6). Maybe you prayed but received no answer—or didn't like the answer God gave you. Maybe you thought you weren't important enough or didn't have the right pedigree to receive God's full attention. Squelch those lies and soak up God's truth. If you believe your life is insignificant, lean into Psalm 139. Start listening to what God has to

say. Take a few moments to read verses 1 through 6 and write what you learn in the space below. I listed a couple of truths to get you started.

- *God knows me intimately.*
- *God knows my every move.*
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After reading this passage, I hope you take away one main truth: you matter. You are significant. God created you. He loves you. He knows you deeply and intimately. And no matter your past or how He has answered your prayers, He longs for you to know Him too.

I realize you cannot change your perspective in one sitting, so I encourage you to meditate on Psalm 139:1–6 this week. Read it in several different Bible translations.<sup>2</sup> Write it as you say it out loud. Pray over it. Let it seep into your heart until you know, without a doubt, that you are loved by a good God who knows the deepest recesses of your soul. You are seen, known, and accepted as God’s own child by a God who cares for you and walks with you every step of your journey. He knows you deeply and intimately, and no matter your past or your present, He longs for you to know Him too.

And while you contemplate this truth, don’t abandon your dreams. The Bible assures us that God’s plans for us are good. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jer. 29:11).



Now read Psalm 139:7–12 and write what you learn about God’s care for you in the space below.

- *God is always present in my life.*
- *God is with me in the darkness and in the light, in the day and in the night.*
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*Martha Kate* ✿ “Faith” was a huge deal for my family; it helped develop the legalism and rules we lived by. For so many years I was afraid of messing up because that would show I didn’t really love Jesus enough. At home with my family, grace played no part in the gospel, so it was incredibly freeing to go to college and learn that I didn’t need to be “good enough” for Jesus to love me.

My early days of transactional prayer (prayers based on my Santa Claus theology and exhausting negotiations) were void of any relationship with my Creator. Even though I was constantly approaching Him with an endless laundry list of demands, my devotion left out this one main truth: God does not need our prayers; *our soul needs to pray*. If I had known this truth—that prayer is about engaging in a relationship with Him rather than receiving blessings from Him—then I might have fallen into a deep relationship with Jesus instead of falling into a deep hole of bitter entitlement and endless appeals.

Yet even in our selfishness and sinfulness, God shows us mercy. The psalmist writes, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:13–14).

Now read Psalm 139:13–18 and write what you learn here:

- *You handcrafted me, poring over every tiny detail to make me exactly the way you wanted me.*
- *You knew every detail of my life before I lived one day.*
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Interestingly, in verse 14 the psalmist praises God not for the things God gave him or the blessings poured out on him but for the simple fact that God created him. God saw fit to give him life. God saw fit to give you life too. God created us. He knows us. And despite our shortcomings, He adopted us into His family. Every day He pours out on us His unwavering love. That alone makes us significant.

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What about you? How do you view God? As your Creator? Friend? Father? Judge? What things about your past have shaped the way you believe God relates to you? Explain.

Would you describe your prayer life as transactional or relational? How does this influence your view of your significance, your self-talk, and the choices you make?

## Memories and Triggers

According to many counselors and researchers, most people do not remember life experiences that occurred before the age of three or four. If you experienced a lot of childhood trauma, you might hold on to vivid memories at these young ages; or the pendulum might swing the other way, and you might have years of no memories at all.

Memories shape our identity as well as our view of God. If a parent constantly criticized your appearance, those words play like a song, repeating endlessly in your head twenty years later. If you suffered sexual abuse by a cousin while everyone in the family looked the other way, you might have trouble sitting in church on Sunday mornings wondering where your Great Rescuer was all those years.

Maybe you try not to think about these painful memories. You've put the past behind you. You've tried to build a new life and a new family, and you long to forgive and, especially, to forget. The problem is, sometimes our brains don't cooperate with our hearts.

While Brandon and I prepared to become foster parents, we learned about potential triggers that might prompt painful, sad, or even scary memories in foster children. We learned that these triggers could cause foster children to cry; become angry, confused, or upset; throw tantrums; fly into uncontrollable rages; or lash out both physically and emotionally. Possible triggers include sounds, smells, foods, songs, television shows, words, items of clothing, and more. The most random, least offensive object, sight, or sensation to us might prompt horrific memories for the child. Unfortunately, the only way to know a child's triggers is to observe and learn the triggers as the child experiences life.

Adults can certainly experience the same phenomenon. Anyone who has suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), abuse, or moderate to severe trauma can react to triggers. Those of us who were raised in dysfunctional homes might be fully functioning, successful adults one minute and incapacitated, floundering children the next.

One year I took a girls' trip to New York City. While eating breakfast (and trying to blend in like a local) at a quaint little deli, my friends asked me about my dad—a topic I rarely discuss. Naturally, when a person is absent from your life, there is little to say about him.

“My parents divorced when I was about two years old and my brother was six,” I explained. “We saw my dad on weekends, but those visits were so sporadic and chaotic that I always begged my mom not to send me. My dad rarely forced the issue. He picked up my brother for weekend visits, but I usually stayed with my grandmother.” As I talked, I remembered the knot I felt in my stomach every time my dad arrived.

My friends and I finished eating breakfast and walked to the subway leading to the 9/11 Memorial. I continued, “Finally, when I was eight years old, my mom, brother, and I moved across the country, and our weekend visits with my dad stopped. We did fly back that first summer to see him though.”

Once we reached the subway, we made our way underground, and I heard the train’s screeching brakes. I felt a blast of cold air hit me in the face as I brushed up against the wall. I heard the echo as I talked. Then a flashback rushed over me. I began telling a story I hadn’t thought about in thirty years.

“My dad was remarried at the time and had two stepkids, who were around the same age as my brother and me. I remember that my dad picked us up from the airport late at night, and we drove to a house I’d never been to before. He led me to a room that had nothing in it but a mattress on the floor. I asked him for a pillow and a blanket because his house was so cold and damp, and he told me it was late and he would get it for me tomorrow. Then he shut the door and left the room. I knew better than to ask again, so I lay on the mattress and listened to a train go by until I drifted off to sleep.

“The next morning my dad and stepmom left the house before breakfast. They said not to eat anything until they got home, which I now find ironic because there was nothing in the house to eat. My stepsister and I found some sugar packets in a cabinet, so we emptied them into her doll’s baby bottles and added water. We drank the sugar water until our parents got home around ten o’clock that night. They brought us Taco Bell,” I said, as I remembered all four of us kids scrambling for the food, like ducks fighting over scraps of bread tossed into the water. “That was a pretty standard visit with my dad.”

I don’t know exactly what triggered this walk down memory lane. Maybe it was the familiar feeling of the cold, dank cement. Maybe it was the echo in the tunnel or the sound of the subway train. Maybe it was the combination of all three. The point is that something familiar triggered that memory—two days out of my life that I had not thought about in thirty years.

You may have similar experiences that abruptly trigger painful memories. Cooking with a new spatula sends your mind back to a spanking that got out of control. A storm causes the power to go out, and you remember all the times your parents couldn't pay the bills so your family lived without electricity. Or perhaps one of your triggers is an anniversary date of a traumatic event.

Memories—both joyful and traumatic—are triggered easily. Difficult memories take us back to places where we felt vulnerable, afraid, unsafe, lonely, angry, unloved, insignificant, and much more. If we are not careful, these negative emotions can overtake our mood and any emotional progress we have made. This is why our minds must be grounded in God's truth.

Keep track of your triggers so you can try to avoid them in the future. And learn grounding techniques to help keep you focused on the here and now for when you can't prevent your triggers. For instance, deep breathing is effective, as is praying, taking a relaxing bath, calling a friend, journaling, memorizing Scripture, and going for a walk. We might not be able to prevent triggers, but we can manage them.

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Has something triggered a painful memory and stirred up difficult emotions in your life? Take a few moments to describe a particular trigger and the memory that followed. Then describe how you handled that event. What might you do differently in the future?

I also encourage you to seek a trusted friend or counselor to help you work through the feelings that surface as a result of memory triggers. She can help you better manage future occurrences and move from a place of pain to one of healing.

Corrie Ten Boom, holocaust survivor and author writes, “Today I know that such memories are the key not to the past, but to the future. I know that the experiences of our lives, when we let God use them, become the mysterious and perfect preparation for the work He will give us to do.”<sup>3</sup> Don’t let your memories hold you back from all God has planned for you, and don’t believe the lies associated with your memories . . . cling to God’s truth.

## Pandora’s Box

Most of us have heard of Pandora’s box, but you may not know the Greek myth associated with the story.

According to the myth, the gods created the first woman on earth and named her Pandora. They gave her a box and told her it was full of special gifts, but she was never allowed to open it. She eventually opened the box (as if we didn’t know that was coming) and hardship, illness, and all the evils of the world flew out of it. This scared Pandora, so she quickly closed the box, shutting hope inside.

This story applies to our lives in a simple way. Our brains are like Pandora’s box, full of hardship and hope. The Enemy wants us to keep our box closed so that we keep the hardship, sadness, and torment inside. God, however, wants us to release the painful memories. If we can open ourselves up and release the grief, only hope will remain.

One of my favorite childhood books is *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. The book is entirely different from the movie, which, in my opinion, was a bust. It’s a brilliant story of a utopian-dystopian society in which memories, pain, choices, and struggle are eliminated in order to achieve perfect peace and balance. Only one person retains the memories, emotions, and colors of their previous way of life, and Jonas is about to receive all of this.

The Giver tells Jonas, “The worst part of holding the memories is not the pain. It’s the loneliness of it. Memories need to be shared.”<sup>4</sup> This is true

for the Giver, and it is true for us. While the Enemy wants us to suppress our pain, God wants us to release it so we can be set free.

You can start this process by working through the chart in appendix A, “Pandora’s Box.” This chart helps you sift through emotional memories, process your emotions surrounding these memories, and then record your thoughts, feelings, and God’s truth.

Turn to appendix A to see an example. The goal is to refute the lie and replace it with God’s truth from Scripture. If you don’t have a Bible verse already in mind, you can use one listed in appendix C, “God’s Truth.” God’s Truth will help you combat the lie you once believed. After processing God’s truth, fill out the last column by describing your response, or the next step you will take toward healing.

After reading the example in appendix A, feel free to make copies of the blank chart so you have additional space to write as many memories as you need. Pandora’s Box is not meant to serve as a one-time exercise. Use this tool whenever painful memories surface. This is your weapon in defeating the Enemy’s lies that say you don’t matter. It will help you replace them with the power of God’s truth that says you are significant and valuable simply because God created you.

## Strengthening Your Roots

1. The first time you heard or read information similar to what was listed in the first part of this chapter (regarding the dismal fates of children from divorced families), how did it make you feel? How did it affect your life and the choices you made?



How do you feel reading it now?

How will it affect your life moving forward?

2. Earlier in the chapter, I explained my Santa Claus view of God. What early memories do you believe shaped your view of God? Explain.

Describe how you see God today.

3. What things have triggered memories for you in the recent past? How did you handle your reaction? What would you choose to do differently now?

In what ways would your life improve if your triggers diminished?

You might consider counseling or asking someone else to help you process your triggers. Start by identifying a church or a friend you can contact this week who can give you a counselor's contact information. Also list your goals and how you would like the counselor to help you.



## 2

# THE PRUNING PROCESS

## *Discarding Your Heavy Baggage*

As a child I believed all married people divorced. After all, both sets of my grandparents divorced; my parents divorced, and every aunt and uncle in my family divorced. I thought that's just what couples did—married, had a few kids, divorced, and maybe even remarried and divorced again.

Then one day when I was about eight years old, I was playing at a friend's house, and in walked her dad after work. "Daddy!" her little sister yelled as she ran and jumped into her dad's arms.

*That's weird,* I thought. *What's he doing here?* My dad never came to my house at the end of the day. Sure, he sometimes came on Friday nights to pick us up for a weekend visit, but not on your average weeknight at dinnertime. That was just plain crazy! Then I remembered that my friend's dad was a Methodist minister. *Oh yeah,* I thought to myself, *he has to stay married because he works at a church.* Mystery solved.

It wasn't until years later that I realized this man of the cloth had stayed true to his marriage vows because of something other than a career obligation. And many more years later, I realized I had brought some heavy baggage concerning commitment, vulnerability, fear, and divorce into my marriage—so heavy that I'm surprised Brandon could carry me over the threshold.

## Step One: Claim Your Baggage

Before I married, I thought two kinds of families existed: the broken and the ideal. After I married, I realized family functioning is not a matter of good and bad, black and white, success and failure.

One of the things that attracted me to Brandon was his love for what I thought was his ideal family—no divorce, addictions, dysfunction, or instability. But as time went on, I took off my rose-colored glasses.

Now don't get too excited. No major skeletons escaped from his family's closet. (I can feel my mother-in-law breaking out in hives just reading this.) You won't see the Oateses partying with the Kardashians or cat fighting on *The Real Housewives of Waco*. Nothing as scandalous as that. I finally understood, however, that none of us has the perfect family tree; even the most pristine family has a kooky cousin in an offshoot branch.

Today, instead of wishing my past looked different, I embrace it. I want to use it for God's glory. I want the world to know God's protective hand is over us, drawing us into deeper relationship with Him even when it seems as if our lives are spinning out of control.

I am broken. You are broken. Even Jesus's family was broken. We strive for perfection. We try to pretend we are perfect. We might even convince ourselves we are perfect. But we are all—at our core—a mess. We all need a Savior to come alongside us and pour out His love on us. We all need Jesus to save us from our sins, to heal our broken family trees, and to save us from the fallen world in which we live.

The first step in preparing to unpack and discard our baggage is this: admitting that we have baggage and acknowledging that the mess we are toting around is too heavy for us to carry on our own. If you want lasting change, ask God to help mend your broken branches. He can, and He will; “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

*Tara* ✿ My parents divorced when I was two, so I don't remember them ever being married. I never felt normal; rather, I felt innately flawed. I even lived with my dad, which felt weird, because most kids from divorced families lived with their moms.

I definitely missed out on any type of carefree, innocent years as a child. I have no memories of ever feeling secure or safe, or that I didn't have the weight of the world on my shoulders. Financial insecurity was always an issue, so we moved a lot. In fact, I attended nine different schools, including three different high schools.

I think this background caused me to value security, stability, and normalcy above almost anything else. I simply hoped to graduate college, stay married, have a job with health insurance, and own a home. I certainly never rebelled in typical teenage fashion or went through a wild phase. Those were luxuries I simply could not afford.

I have always been one to choose the conservative, safe route in life. Thankfully, my husband has always understood this about me. We've always made life decisions conservatively, shying away from anything too risky or too far outside the box. For example, we waited until we had been married five years and owned a home before having our first child. I suppose there have been pros and cons to this approach, but especially in the early years of our marriage, my husband's understanding was really crucial for me.

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What about you? What do you wish you could change about your past or your family of origin? Why? What would supposedly be better?

How do you envision your future? What lies from your broken past have shaped your vision? What do you believe God's vision is for you?

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## Step Two: Recognize That Even Jesus Had Familial Baggage

You and I are not the only ones who came into this world with baggage. Take a few moments to read Matthew 1:1–17.

We tend to skip this genealogy; however, this list is important for us to know about so that we realize that, just as we come from imperfect family trees, Jesus came from an imperfect family tree. Let's take a look at some of our perfect Savior's imperfect relatives.

### *King David*

This guy succumbs to his lustful passions and commits adultery. He impregnates Bathsheba, and then to cover up this atrocity, he orders the murder of Bathsheba's husband.

What I love about the story of David is his multidimensional nature. Before his fall from grace, David praised God, spent time with his Creator, and cried out for protection. After his transgressions, he had a grievous, repentant heart. God extended favor to David, calling him, "a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22).

David reminds us that we all sin, we all fall short of God's desires for our lives, and that there is always room for grace. God loves giving second chances, if we will take them.

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Think of a time you've fallen short of God's desire for you. Were you able to receive God's grace? What did that look like in your life?

In what ways has God given you a second chance? Were you able to embrace it?

Take a few moments to read and respond to Psalm 51.