

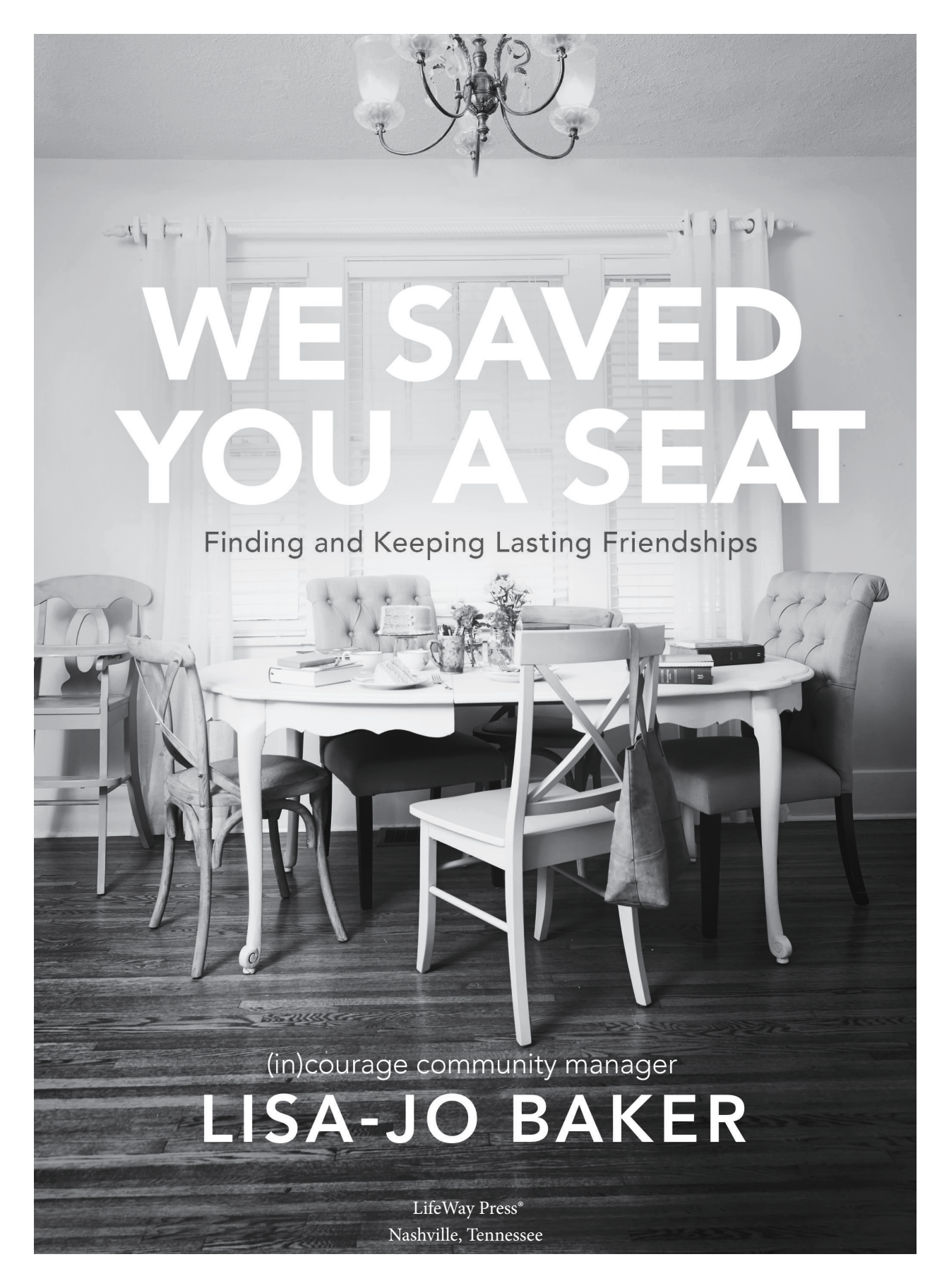


WE SAVED YOU A SEAT

Finding and Keeping Lasting Friendships

(in)courage community manager

LISA-JO BAKER



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



LISA-JO BAKER

Lisa-Jo Baker has been the community manager for *www.incourage.me*, an online home for women all over the world, for nearly a decade. She is the author of *Never Unfriended* and *Surprised by Motherhood*, as well as the creator of *The Temper Toolkit*, and her writings have been syndicated from New Zealand to New York. She lives just outside Washington, DC, with her husband and their three very loud kids, where she connects, encourages, and champions women in person and through her blog, *lisajobaker.com*. She is convinced that the shortest distance between strangers is a shared awkward story, and she'd love to connect with you on Twitter®, Facebook®, or Instagram® @lisajobaker.

(in)courage

FIND YOURSELF AMONG FRIENDS

At (in)courage you are welcome to a place of faith, connection, and friendship, where you will always find yourself among friends. Founded in 2009 by DaySpring, the Christian products subsidiary of Hallmark Cards, Inc., the vision for (in)courage was to create a new home for the hearts of women, where women take turns pulling up a chair to share their stories of what Jesus looks like in their everyday, gloriously ordinary, and often messy lives. Since then, (in)courage has grown into a vibrant community that reaches thousands of women every day, welcoming them just the way they are, offering a space to breathe, loving support, and resources for meaningful connection.

ABOUT THE VIDEO PARTICIPANTS



ALIA JOY

Alia Joy is a writer, speaker, and home-schooling mother of three making her home in Central Oregon with her husband, Josh, her tiny Asian mother, a dog, a bunny, and a bunch of chickens. She shares her life with readers of her blog, *aliajoy.com*, where she believes some of the most powerful words are “me too.” She writes so people will know they’re not alone and that God is good even when life gets messy. She is also a regular monthly contributor at (in)courage, SheLoves Magazine, GraceTable, The Mudroom, and Deeper Waters. Find her on Instagram @AliaJoy.



ALIZA LATTA

Aliza Latta is a Canadian writer, journalist, and artist, who is a huge fan of telling stories—whether through speech, written prose, or art. She writes about faith and young adulthood on her blog, *alizanaomi.com*, and creates hand-lettered prints for her online shop, *etsy.com/shop/choosebrave*. Find her on Twitter or Instagram as @alizalatta.



DEIDRA RIGGS

Deidra Riggs is the visionary behind life-changing events for writers, artists, entrepreneurs, and other fabulous people who have an amazing dream. She is the author of *Every Little Thing: Making a World of Difference Right Where You Are* and *ONE: Unity in a Divided World*. Through her engaging and relatable talks, practical and inspiring books, and first-class events, she works to cross cultural boundaries, build bridges with those who are different, and create more peace in the world while making it all feel like a fabulous celebration of life. When she’s not inspiring people to live life to the fullest and push past invisible boundaries, you can find her frolicking in the ocean, dancing to loud disco tunes, or hosting a group of her closest friends around the dinner table.



KRISTEN STRONG

Kristen Strong is wife to her retired Air Force veteran, mama to three priority blessings, and fresh-air giver to you. She is the author of *Girl Meets Change*, a book that helps women see their difficult life change in a more hopeful light. Kristen writes regularly at *chasingblueskies.net* and once a month at DaySpring’s *incourage.me* to encourage women to see themselves as Jesus does. She and her family zigzagged across the country (and one ocean!) several times before settling in Colorado Springs. Kristen would love to connect with you on her favorite social media site Instagram as @kristenstrong.

WHY SHOULD YOU DO A BIBLE STUDY ABOUT FRIENDSHIP?

Because I don't know anyone who doesn't want friends. But I know lots of women who worry about being unfriended. Or misunderstood. Or hurt or judged or left out or taken for granted by their friends. I'm one of them.

So they stop trying. They stop risking. They stop starting over. Because they've stopped believing there'll be a seat saved for them at the table—at the book club, the PTA meeting, the Bible study, the office break room, the retreat, the lunch date, the church pew, or the living room sofa of the women who used to be their best friends.

That's what this study is about. It's about not giving up on friendship. Even when we're frustrated by it. Even when we're tired of it, confused by it, or disappointed in it. This is a chance to change that.

This is a practical guide to finding and keeping lasting friendships.

This is believing that there really is a seat saved for you at the table. And it's also about becoming the kind of women who will always save a seat for the women around them.

Because, the ultimate friend, Jesus—the one who moved into the neighborhood and pulled up a chair to get to know us, the friend of the popular and unpopular, of priests and pastors, of the educated and the uneducated, of elementary school girls and their minivan driving moms—put it pretty plain and simple. When asked what the greatest commandment was, He said,

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul,
and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important
command. The second is like it: **Love your neighbor as yourself.**
All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.
MATTHEW 22:36-40 (EMPHASIS MINE)

And when pressed to define who exactly this neighbor is that we're commanded to love, He didn't give an inch. He gave a story. And it defines neighbor not as a particular "who," but instead as a "what": as in *what* you should *do*. The parable of the good Samaritan isn't about identifying your neighbor; it's about *being* a neighbor. In essence, it's about being the kind of friend you wish you had.

While we might have defined friendship our whole lives by what others do to us, in the end it's what we do for others that will define us as friends or not. That's how we get friendship to stick. And that's what this study is about.

Together we will unpack what that kind of friendship takes—seven practical ways to take Jesus up on His invitation to love other people. To be friends who go first, who make the first move—and sometimes the hundredth move—of starting over. This is the meat and potatoes of life—figuring out how to get along with the people we love as well as the ones who rub us the wrong way. This is the whole shebang explored in seven simple steps.

Here's how it's going to work:

- Gather some friends to watch each video session or enjoy tuning in from the comfort of your own home.
- Use the Viewer Guide to process the video discussion.
- Spend the next week working through three days of Bible study to dig deeper into what it takes to find and keep lasting friendships.
- Circle back together again to discuss what you learned the past week, watch the next video, and dig deeper into the content throughout the week. Repeat.

Let's do this together.



THE
cardinal
rule of
FRIENDSHIP
is you have to
BE WILLING
to go FIRST.

#WSYAS

WEEK 1:

FRIENDSHIP TAKES SHOWING UP

*For God loved the world in this way: He gave his
one and only Son, so that everyone who believes
in him will not perish but have eternal life.*

JOHN 3:16



Friendship TAKES Showing up

VIEWER GUIDE: SESSION 1

Watch the Session 1 video and discuss with your group the following questions:

1. Why do you think it's so difficult to make lasting friendships as women?
2. Read James 3:18 in The Message paraphrase. (Read multiple translations if you can.) What does James say about our personal responsibility in friendship?
3. Lisa-Jo explained in the video, "God breathed into our DNA the need for community." How have you seen this truth in your own life? How do you think we've been hardwired for authentic friendships?
4. Alia noted how easy it is to be lonely, even within a church group. How have you experienced loneliness even in the midst of the group?
5. Why is authentic conversation (beyond "I'm fine") difficult at times for you or others?
6. Discuss how we can enter into more authentic and personal conversations instead of settling for superficial answers such as "I'm fine."
7. What are some excuses we use not to show up (i.e., "I'm too busy.")?
8. Aliza described loving friends in *their* best way. Describe a time when you have failed or succeeded in loving someone in *her* best way. Why is this important?
9. Describe examples of how Jesus loved people in *their* best way.
10. With your group, highlight any meaningful truths you took away from today's conversation at the table.



Lined writing area with horizontal lines.





DAY 1

BELIEVE WHAT GOD SAYS ABOUT FRIENDSHIP

Can you be convinced that nothing could make the God who gave up His title, His throne, His realm, and His only Son for you ever consider unfriending you? No matter how crabby you are, how tired, frustrated, or unloving?

Because that's where we need to start, at the beginning of the first friendship: God's friendship with the human beings He created. This is the road map for all future friendships.

What if I told you that neither Facebook nor church cliques, friendship breakups nor family disapproval, bad moods nor all your undone to-dos will ever be able to separate us from the radical, never-giving-up, never-looking-back love of God? God's love proved itself when it took deep breaths in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, who literally moved into the neighborhood so that He could be up close and personal friends with *you* and who has promised that He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Would you believe me?

What is going through your head right now? Because I know that talking about friendship can stir up a lot of feelings and a lot of memories—both good and bad. So, let's unpack some of those. What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think about friendship? Just write it down here without editing yourself. It's OK to be brutally honest.

When I think about friendship, I feel:

When I think about friendship, I remember:

When I think about friendship, I wish:

I don't know about you, but when I think about friendship my stomach can knot up. Sure, I feel warm and fuzzy about it on some days. I have close friends who wrap me in safety and loving acceptance. But when I really think about it, the idea of friendship can spark hundreds of hard memories. Evenings spent awkwardly trying not to cry in hotel lobbies or panic checking my phone in the middle of the night or trying to act like it's no big deal when I'm not invited to the same event I wasn't invited to last year.

Friendship is not easy. It's not always fun. It's rarely like the commercials or "squad goals" photos the ad world or online world would like us to believe. Because nothing hurts quite like the unkind words of a friend, even the careless words that weren't intended to cut can leave scars. And I know I'm not the only one who feels this way.

I've heard too many stories, cried with too many women, and apologized too many times to think I'm the only one with these bruises on my heart and holes in my story where friends fell through.

I'm guessing you can relate.

I'm guessing there are days you just want to be done with it all. It feels like too much extra work when your plate is already full and you're already juggling a circus of commitments. You don't need one more to-do, especially from a person who wants nothing to do with you. It's so much easier to just chuck it and be done with it all.

But here's the thing—I believe that it is both physically and spiritually impossible to simply wash our hands of other people.

As much as you might try to quit it, friendship is literally woven into your bones. With every breath you take, about 20 breaths per minute, you are entirely dependent on the life breathed into you by a God whose entire existence is a living, breathing friendship of three. He has designed friendship into your DNA, so trying to cut friendship out of your life is like trying to cut a piece of yourself out of yourself. It will hurt. It will leave open wounds. I hope I can convince you that it's not worth it—and that it's not healthy for your soul.



LET'S GO BACK TO THE BEGINNING. READ GENESIS 1:1.

Who is the very first character we meet in the Bible?

Many scholars believe that the Hebrew word used to name this character in the first verse is *Elohim*. This is significant because *Elohim* is the *plural* form of that Hebrew word.

In the next few chapters of Genesis, God refers to Himself in the plural form twice more.

READ GENESIS 1:26a AND GENESIS 3:22a.

What are the two pronouns God uses to refer to Himself in these verses?

From the very first sentences of the story of God and the people He created we are introduced to Him as a holy friendship that we call the Trinity—one God, in three different Persons. Those three parts of God might be as familiar to you as your own name or they might be a brand new idea. Either way, let's read 2 Corinthians 13:13 and write down each of the three Persons who make up our one God as well as the character trait Paul associates with each of them:

1. The _____ of _____
2. The _____ of _____
3. The _____ of the _____

Genesis is the first place we get to overhear God having a conversation with Himself. And this won't be the last time. Throughout Jesus' life we will get to overhear God the Son having conversations with God the Father, and we will hear God the Son talking about God the Holy Spirit.

One of the most poignant times we get to listen in on the friendship between our three-in-one God is the tender moment of Jesus' baptism—where all three Persons of the Trinity are specifically mentioned.

**LET'S READ MATTHEW 3:13-17 AND IDENTIFY EACH PART OF THE TRINITY
AND WHAT THEY EACH SAID/DID:**

“When _____ was baptized, he went up immediately from the water. The heavens suddenly opened for him, and he saw the _____ descending like a _____ and coming down on him. And a voice from heaven said:

‘This is my _____, with whom I am well-pleased’
(vv. 16-17).

The profound tenderness and holy joy that ripples through that moment can give you goosebumps. Here is blessing and friendship and benediction and delight all wrapped up into a single recorded moment in history. This is God publicly celebrating and delighting in the most sacred of relationships—His own.

We have been modeled on and built out of that DNA, made in an image that bears the permanent mark of friendship. We are intended for friendship with God and friendship with each other. But from the very beginning, Satan has tried to burn that image out of us.

Once Satan spewed his first temptation and Adam and Eve doubted God and then disobeyed Him, we see the backlash of our broken relationship with God ripping through history. From Adam and Eve, to Cain and Abel, to Noah and his community, to Abraham and Lot, to Saul and David, to Mary and Martha, to the squabbling disciples and down through our biblical family tree to you and me, Satan is on a campaign to convince us to doubt God and distrust each other.

But our faithful God has been just as determined to keep putting back together the original friendship that got broken. The entire story of Scripture hinges on how Jesus has come to restore our relationships, first with God and second with each other. In the verse that is the heartbeat of God's friendship with us we read:

For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.
JOHN 3:16

It's the entire reason why Jesus was on earth and available to be baptized. He came to make things right so that we could live at peace with God as well as with the other human beings God created and placed in our lives.





LET'S READ FROM COLOSSIANS TOGETHER:

He [Jesus] is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have
first place in everything.
For God was pleased to have
all his fullness dwell in him,
and through him to reconcile
everything to himself
whether things on earth or things in heaven,
by making peace
through his blood, shed on the cross.

COLOSSIANS 1:18b-20 (EMPHASIS MINE)

Everything. Every single broken heart, every twisted family tie, every crushed spirit and wounded relationship, every single thing that has breath to breathe and tears to cry—*everything* is able and intended to be reconciled to God through His Son, Jesus Christ. Such is His wild and wonderful love for us, the creatures created in His image.

And in the final conversation Jesus the Son had with God the Father before He was betrayed and crucified we get to hear firsthand how passionately Jesus feels about that assignment.

In one of His final prayers before He was crucified, some of Jesus' very last words to His Father were about His friends—the people entrusted to Him. What did He say about them?

GO AND READ JOHN 17:6-19.

Jesus could tell His Father, in no uncertain terms, that as far as it was possible for Him, He had kept the faith and the friendship of every one of the friends entrusted to Him. Even Judas had been included right up until the moment He chose to quit Jesus, not the other way around.

If you have a highlighter, please highlight or underline verse 12 in your Bible.

Now put your own name into the verse:

“While I was with _____, I was protecting [her] by your name that you have given me. I guarded _____ ...” (John 17:12).

When you hear the word *protected* what does it bring to mind? Write down a few words you associate with the idea of being “protected.”

When you hear the word *guarded* what does it bring to mind? Write down a few words you associate with the idea of being “guarded.”

Both words are significant cornerstones of what it means to be God’s friend. The commentaries spend a lot of time unpacking the power of these words. *Protection* gives us the image of a shepherd tenderly caring for and feeding his flock, while *guarding* implies the kind of actions that would bravely protect you from all kinds of wild beasts determined to rip your life to shreds.¹

Taking the image even further, the Greek word Jesus used when he talked about guarding His disciples meant the kind of protection you’d get “behind the walls of a fortress.”² Those are the very walls Jesus wraps around you—to guard and protect you by His Holy Spirit. You are so dear to Him. He is the friend who gave up His very life to protect you. He is the friend who lived up to His own definition of love and friendship.

Write it down here from John 15:13:

“No one has greater love than this: _____”

He is the friend who is with you, protecting you, and guarding you, even with His very own life.

Now think of the people in your life. Picture the faces of your friends—even the ones who have frustrated, irritated, or hurt you. Can you put them into this sentence?

“While I was with _____, I was protecting [her] by your name that you have given me. I guarded _____ ...” (John 17:12).

Can you do that? Are you willing to be a safe place for them—a friend who will offer the walls of protection and compassion like a fortress around them?

That’s what this study is about—believing that we are safely guarded by Jesus’ friendship and, secondly, being willing to put our friends—the people trusted to us—into John 17:12. We can’t guard and protect our friends in the way that Jesus guards and protects His followers, but we’re called to become a guard around their lives with real friendship. A friendship that doesn’t hold back and prays for them. A friendship that always believes the best about them and wants the best for them because we’re convinced that is how serious God is about His friendship with us. Ultimately, we want to be like Jesus. We want to be willing to lay down our lives for our friends (John 15:13).

But until we have that truth cemented into the foundation of our identity, we will not be able to give that kind of friendship to other people.

For that kind of friendship to be possible you need to believe it first for yourself. So as we get started on this journey together, please take this truth and deposit it—use superglue if necessary—into the very core of who you are: Jesus guarded His friends—that includes you and me—with His very life.

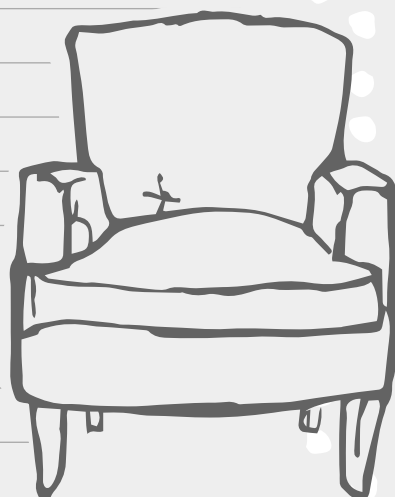


FRIENDSHIP CHALLENGE

At the end of every day, we will take a Friendship Challenge. This will help you apply what we've learned to your own life and relationships. Today, write out this verse and stick it above your mirror, on your car's dashboard, in your closet, or as the screen saver on your phone so that you can begin to superglue its truth to your soul. Be sure to put your own name, as well as the name of at least one friend, in the blanks:

“While I was with _____, I was protecting [her] by your name that you have given me. I guarded _____...” (John 17:12).

Use the additional space on this page and other Friendship Challenge pages to jot down things that you've learned.

A simple line drawing of a sofa or couch, positioned on the right side of the page. The drawing is minimalist, showing the backrest, seat, and front legs with clean, dark lines. It is oriented towards the left, facing the main body of lined paper.



DAY 2

BE WILLING TO BE INTERRUPTED

If you ask people how they're doing these days you'll likely hear one of two responses: "I'm fine" or "I'm so busy." We live in a world where politeness trumps honesty and productivity trumps rest. So the last thing anyone expects to hear in response to the question, "How are you?" is the truth. Because some days that might sound like, "I'm crazy excited about my new promotion," "I'm so smitten with my new baby," or "I'm enjoying a quiet afternoon off."

But, there are other answers that are harder to share, so we tend to shove them deep down inside of us where they can't slip out and shock anyone: *I'm exhausted. I'm depressed. I don't think I can stand being a mom for another minute. I'm overwhelmed. I'm lonely. I'm still grieving. I'm maxed out, or I'm about to lose my mind.* It feels awkward to interrupt someone else's day by shoving onto them the unexpected baggage of how we're *actually* doing. It feels like an inconvenience. An interruption. An imposition on their time.

So we get really good about faking fine and keeping our baggage tucked neatly away so that it doesn't spill over into the lives and afternoons of the people around us. That would be embarrassing and awkward because what happens when you tell someone how you're really doing and they don't have time for it?

If there's one thing that defined Jesus' time on earth it was His willingness to be interrupted. And not just that there were constant interruptions (and good grief there were a ridiculous amount of those!), what's so striking is how instead of being annoyed by them, He *welcomed* them.

Let's compare how we feel/act about interruptions to how Jesus responded to being interrupted.

First, make a list of how *you* think *other people* will react if you interrupt their day to tell them how you're *really* doing and ask for help instead of just giving the default answer of, "I'm fine." (I've filled in the first two to get you started.)

I'm worried that if I tell people how I'm really doing they will feel:

Inconvenienced

Embarrassed

Now make a list of how you might react if someone interrupted *your* day to tell you how they're really doing and to ask for help.

If someone else shared how she was really doing, instead of just saying she was "fine," I'd feel:

Surprised

Nervous

Now let's spend some time with Jesus to see how His days and His interruptions looked. Read the verses and answer the questions at the top of the following chart. If we trace several days in Jesus' life as chronicled by His disciples, Matthew and Mark, this is what we find:

Verses	Where was Jesus going?	Who interrupted Him?	What did they want?	What did Jesus do?
Matthew 8:5-13	To the city of Capernaum			
Matthew 8:14-15	To Peter's house			
Matthew 8:18, 23-27	To the other side of the Sea of Galilee			
Matthew 8:28-34	To the region of the Gadarenes			
Matthew 9:1-8	Back across the sea to His own town (Capernaum)			
Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26	To teach His disciples			
Matthew 9:20-22	To Jairus' house			
Matthew 9:27-30	He "went on from there" (from Jairus' house) to another house			
Mark 10:46-52	Leaving Jericho			
Matthew 19:13-15	To teach His disciples			

Jesus stopped *every single time*. He allowed Himself to be interrupted, detoured, and inconvenienced. It's never the perfect time and never in a perfect setting. This is eye-opening for me—the woman intimidated by Pinterest® who has been known to shove dirty dishes into the microwave and/or hide in the bedroom when unexpected visitors stop by—because by Sunday afternoons our house often looks like a circus passed through with every surface covered in teetering stacks of dishes or piles of laundry, and shoes, swimsuits, socks, pens, and pencils flung every which way around the front door and in a chaotic trail down the hall.

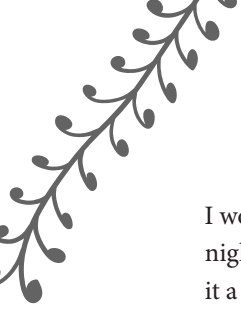
If I'm being super forthcoming, I've even sweated the planned visits. I admit I like the perfectly-planned setting, food, kid behavior, and a visit that has a set start and end time. For years I would have described myself as a “reluctant renter.” We were married 17 years before we bought our first house. And one of our longest rentals was small, grubby, and had faux bricks that constantly fell off the kitchen walls and carpets that, well, let's just say back then we had three kids under the age of five and leave the rest up to your imagination.

For years my small, terribly imperfect house stunted my hospitality.

But the thing is, being willing to be interrupted isn't about the state of our houses. It's about the state of our hearts. Women aren't hungry for perfection; they're hungry for connection. One of the ways our world of the fast and furious Internet hurts us is that so often our schedules and attention spans don't have enough time to give each other uninterrupted hours of conversation. But we will starve on a diet of conversations limited to 140 character tweets, text messages, or Facebook quips. We need soul food conversations. The kind that don't cut you off because they have another appointment to run to. The kind that lingers.

I learned this the hard way through a selfish, split-second moment when I wasn't willing to make time for a friend—when I wasn't willing to be interrupted, when I wasn't willing to linger. And I would take it back if I could. But I can't because my dear friend passed away a couple weeks after the night I avoided her.

I remember it with a knot in my stomach. It was a night when I was tired and our kids were being wild and unruly after a late night church event. All I wanted was to wrangle everyone back into the minivan, to home, and to bed. I wanted my shoes off, my hair down, and my comfy pants on. And as I was crossing through the church hall, I kept my eyes down so that I wouldn't have to stumble into conversation with anyone.



I wove my way through the chairs trying to get to my kids and spotted one of my Tuesday night Bible study girls with her back to me and her hand on her cane. Without even giving it a second thought I backtracked around her so that I wouldn't have to pause to talk. So that I wouldn't have to give up a second of my time to a friend who lived by herself in a small room with her cats and her passion for beautiful, colorful necklaces and who came out every Tuesday night because she was so hungry for company.

Just a few weeks later she had a stroke that she never recovered from. She died before there was a chance for any more nights together. It was a small, invisible moment that she didn't even know I stole from her, but steal it I did. And it was the last time I saw her alive. I only saw her back because my tired, selfish heart avoided a friend when it should have given the gift of its own time and presence. I know better. And I have to live with that memory. Time is a gift that doesn't even belong to me, but it was gifted by God, who spoke hours and minutes into being the moment He set the sun and the moon in the sky.

I stood at her memorial service though, and I got to bear witness to the generous way she had spent her life. I got to hear from person after person about how she'd poured herself into each one of them. We laughed, cried, and sang our hearts out in memory of a woman who was quirky and beloved, and I loved her too. She wasn't perfect—and she knew I wasn't either—but now I get to carry her in my heart where she reminds me that giving people our time is an act of radical generosity. It's countercultural to refuse to utter those three words we say without even thinking, "I'm too busy." I don't want to be too busy. I don't want to be hung up on whether my house is presentable or not. I want to be available.

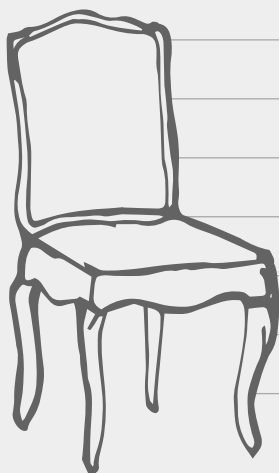
I want to be willing to be interrupted. Period.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer described it like this in his book, *Life Together*:

We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions. We may pass them by, preoccupied with our more important tasks. ... It is a strange fact that Christians and even ministers frequently consider their work so important and urgent that they will allow nothing to disturb them. They think they are doing God a service in this, but actually they are disdaining God's "crooked yet straight path."³

FRIENDSHIP CHALLENGE

Let's get real honest together. Write down the names of specific people who felt like an interruption to your week. Let's flip that on its head and consider what God might actually be asking us to say to them or do with them. Maybe it's as simple as listening, taking a walk, doing a project, or sharing a movie night. Write down their names and ask God what He'd like you to do for them this week.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. In the bottom-left corner, there is a simple black-and-white line drawing of a chair or stool, showing its backrest, seat, and legs. The rest of the page is empty space between the lines.



DAY 3

CRY AND CELEBRATE TOGETHER

So far, I'm hoping we've learned at least two things about friendship together: 1) God is your forever friend, and 2) Friendship welcomes interruptions. Along the way there really isn't room for worrying what your friends will think about the current state of your life, because true friends are more interested in the state of your heart than the state of your house. I love how The Message describes the incarnation—that sacred moment when God wrapped Himself up in human skin, feelings, body, and soul. John 1:14 says: "The Word became flesh and blood, and *moved into the neighborhood*" (emphasis mine). Jesus closed the gap between God and us by pulling up a chair alongside the daily lives of humanity so that we could know Him because He would make Himself known to us.

We are invited to do the same thing Jesus did: be willing to experience life with the community around us, giving our friends the same gift Jesus did—the gift of our presence—to show up and do one of two things.

READ ROMANS 12:15, AND WRITE DOWN WHAT THESE TWO THINGS ARE:

"_____ with those who _____; _____ with those who _____."

In other words, showing up for our friends can look as simple as doing the ugly cry with them or joining their celebrations with whooping and hollering and confetti. It sounds simple, but it takes discipline. It takes intentionality. And more often than we admit, it takes courage.

Jesus' example is so radical because He lived it. He lived out the whole arc of the human emotional spectrum—from weddings to funerals. He literally rejoiced as well as wept in public, and we have it recorded in Scripture. Two of what might be His most well-known miracles take place in these settings—at the joy of a wedding and in the despair of a death.

Read both stories, and write out in your own words what the atmosphere might have been like at each event:

John 2:1-11

John 11:17-36

According to John 11:3 how did Jesus feel about Lazarus?

How did Lazarus' sisters describe his relationship with Jesus?

The emotional energy at both events is off the charts—delight and despair, passion and gut-wrenching grief, hope and doubt. And Jesus willingly stepped into both environments and into the deep well of human emotions. I don't know about you, but sometimes I can be intimidated by the emotional highs and lows of my friends. It can be hard to know the right words to say in the midst of their grief or how to balance their celebration with my own insecurities. Those are the nitty gritty details behind the scenes of Romans 12:15, which is why I love getting a glimpse at the details surrounding Jesus' interactions with His friends in both their highs and their lows.

Bible commentaries allow us to paint a vivid picture of what those moments meant to the people living them. Behind the scenes of the story of the wedding in Cana we learn,

A wedding is always a gala occasion, and in a village like Cana it would be a community celebration. "Refreshments" were provided for all guests. ... To fail in providing adequately for the guests would involve social disgrace. In the closely knit communities of Jesus' day, such an error would never be forgotten and would haunt the newly married couple all their lives. The situation prompted Mary's urgency when she informed Jesus of the emergency.⁴

Dancing, love, laughter, and passion. Seven days of joy, food, family, telling stories, and catching up on life and celebrating—and the vital importance of being able to provide generously for all your guests. And there was Jesus, right at the heart of it.

And a death? The desperate despair of loss. In the shortest verse in Scripture we know that “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). Commentaries paint for us the nuances so that we can see and experience the picture more vividly:

The third word, ... (“wept”), means to shed tears quietly. It may be contrasted with the loud and ostentatious weeping ... of the hired mourners (v. 33), which was artificial. ... Jesus’ sorrow impressed the onlookers with the depth of his concern.⁵

Are we brave enough to follow Jesus’ example and open up our hearts to the raw emotions of our friends?

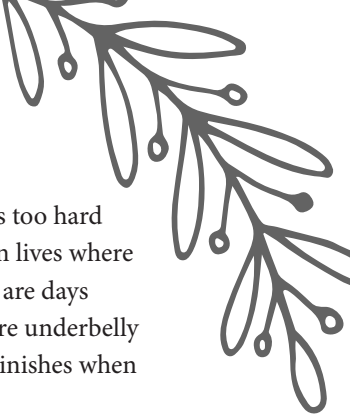
Describe a reaction you’ve had to someone else’s scary sorrow.

Describe a reaction you’ve had to someone else’s overpowering joy.

Recently, over hamburgers and corn on the cob, our pastor’s wife told me how she’s spent the last four years walking with a friend through the long, slow, terrible valley of grief. I was sort of stunned. Four years! Who has the guts to go that kind of distance? Who has it in them to commit to a friend through the terrible roller coaster of grief for that long? It’s rare. It’s holy. It’s heroic. It’s a gift.

After my mom died I had friends quit me because my grief was too heavy to carry. I don’t blame them. There were many days I wished I could have quit it myself. Grief is exhausting, and if you have the choice, it’s a luxury to choose to avoid it. But on an ordinary Monday afternoon, there was this woman of faith telling me how she knew from the get-go that she was going to commit to the whole journey through grief with her friend.

Because like all hard and painful things, the only way through is through. And if you have a friend willing to walk that dark road with you, you might have a decent chance of making it out on the other side. But even with a friend by your side, it will be hard to find the bits and pieces of yourself to put them back together again in a pattern you can recognize in the mirror.



The strange thing about joy is that it can have the same effect—sometimes it's too hard for our friends to embrace. Sometimes our joy pricks at the parts of their own lives where they're dissatisfied. Sometimes our joy highlights their hurts or losses. There are days when someone else's joy feels more like a threat than a celebration. The bizarre underbelly of joy taints when it should encourage, threatens when it should inspire, diminishes when it should enlarge.

Ask any woman struggling with infertility how she feels when she's invited to just one more baby shower. Ask any motherless daughter how Mother's Day feels. Ask any aspiring author what it's like to hear your friend's book hit the bestseller's list. Ask any coworker what it means when your friend makes the team, gets the opportunity, the raise, or the promotion that you didn't. You know what I'm talking about, right?

When was the last time you were so sad you felt like what your soul was experiencing was bigger than your body could contain? When was the last time your soul wept?

When was the last time you were so filled with delight and the desire to share your news and celebrate with someone that you couldn't possibly hold it all in? When was the last time your soul rejoiced?

The thing about Jesus is how through all of those experiences He is in the business of making all things new. Write out Revelation 21:5a (the first part of the verse):

God, in His infinite wisdom and His inability to be limited by sin, is constantly transforming our lives and our faith. Literally. In both stories we've studied above, Jesus used the experiences to transform. To make something new. To transform water into something much more special. To transform death into life. The wedding at Cana and the death of Lazarus bear witness to Jesus' transformative nature. In His kingdom nothing is wasted; no grief or joy is left to stand alone. Both are arrows pointing us back to the God who is constantly transforming us more and more into His own image.

If we will bravely enter into the joy and sorrow of our friends it will transform us and them because it will always point us back to Christ. Listen to how *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* describes the transformative nature of Jesus' first miracle that changed way more than the water:

The purpose of Jesus' first miracle after entering Galilee is not stated. ... The nature of the miracle is very plain. Jesus had come to bring about conversion: water to wine, sinners to saints. And this latter miracle of transformation occurred in almost complete obscurity. Few know when or how it happened, but they know that it did happen.

The effect of this miracle is noteworthy. It marked the beginning of a ministry accompanied by supernatural power; and it proved so convincing to the new disciples that they "put their faith in him." The deed helped confirm the conclusion they had drawn from their previous interviews with him: Jesus must be the Messiah.⁶

At a wedding, in a totally unexpected way, Jesus began His ministry of transformation—of making all things new—starting with the people around Him. The delightful quality of the miracle Jesus performed on the water wasn't about the pleasure it brought to the guests. It was about the change He was offering to bring about in their lives.

This is the same story we see unfold outside a tomb in Bethany:

Why should [Jesus] be glad that he was not present to save Lazarus from death, or to comfort the sisters, and why should Lazarus's death bring any benefit to the disciples? Jesus considered this an opportunity for a supreme demonstration of power that would certify the Father's accreditation of him as the Son and confirm the faith of the sisters and the disciples. He was certain of the outcome.⁷

To make ourselves vulnerable to experience the grief and the joy of our friends is to make ourselves available to being changed—transformed—by the Christ who is always present on all our journeys on the emotional spectrum. When we let our fears, insecurities, or awkwardness stop us from fully entering into the experiences of the people around us, we limit the transformative impact the Holy Spirit can have on our lives. While we might not know how to put those experiences into words, He does. He's the friend available to process all of it with us.



Write out Romans 8:26.

That second half of the verse is translated in a variety of ways—all of them sweet with the tender intimacy of how closely God is willing to walk with us as we try to make sense of our sorrows and joys and the sorrows and joys of the people around us:

CSB: The Spirit himself intercedes for us with unspoken groanings.

NIV: The Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

NLT: The Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words.

ESV: The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

MSG: He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans.

ROMANS 8:26

In every translation we get the raw ability of the Holy Spirit to express even the things we can't manage to put into words ourselves. He is our constant, trustworthy companion as we try to make sense of our experiences and participate in the journeys of the people we love. I don't want to miss that chance. I don't want my own self-consciousness, selfishness, or tiredness to distract me from participating in the life-changing work of God in me and in the people around me.

But I know I have failed and I will fail again, and so I'm desperate to learn from Jesus' closest friends who stand as a cautionary tale for what not to do when someone we love is desperate for support.

READ MATTHEW 26:36-45, WHEN JESUS' CLOSEST FRIENDS UTTERLY MISSED THE CHANCE TO HELP HIM CARRY THE HEAVY LOAD OF HIS WORRY AND HIS GRIEF.



What were the emotions Jesus was experiencing based on what He said to His disciples?

What distracted them from fully entering into what Jesus was going through?

I've always thought the worst betrayal of the night was Peter's denial of Jesus, but the more I studied this passage, the more terrible this moment grew in my mind. In the moment when Peter denied Jesus we don't know if there was anything he could have actually said or done to bring comfort to Jesus, His dearest friend.

But in the garden, in the dark of night, Jesus spelled out exactly what His friends could do to encourage and comfort Him. And they failed Him 100 percent.

What are three things Jesus asked the three disciples He had brought with Him into this intimate moment of grief and suffering to do?

The sense of betrayal He must have felt at returning to find them fast asleep, not once, not twice, but three times (interestingly the same number of times Peter would deny Him verbally later that night) must have cut Him deeply before He even encountered Judas and the soldiers in the garden.

I'm desperate not to disappoint my Jesus. I'm desperate for His help in keeping watch with Him. I don't want to miss Him. I want to be awake with Him and for Him. But how you might ask? Well, we know that Jesus shows up in the faces and the stories and the voices, in the joys and sorrows of the people we encounter on what feels like totally ordinary Mondays, Tuesdays, or Sundays. He shows up in the lives of our whiny children, our difficult family members, and our struggling friends.

Just a few chapters earlier in Matthew 25:40, what had Jesus taught?

It's right there in black and white. If you want to comfort Jesus in His most suffocating sorrows or celebrate with Him in His most tremendous triumphs, you have to start with the people around you—the people Jesus has trusted to you, the men and women who bear His image.

FRIENDSHIP CHALLENGE

Let's start right here, right now. Make a list below of the people in your life who could use your company this week—whether they're walking a journey of joy or sorrow, excitement or despair. Write their names down and then make the time to connect with them this week. And wait and see how you're transformed by it—by meeting Jesus in the lives of the people around you.

It doesn't take much. And sure sometimes the showing up can make us feel awkward. It might make us feel embarrassed but only for the few minutes it takes us to stop thinking about ourselves. As soon as we're able to look past ourselves and focus on our friend, neighbor, or coworker, the sooner we're able to forget about saying the right thing and simply start saying the next thing.

You might be surprised how helpful that is to keep in mind. Just say the next thing—*pepperoni or cheese? Coffee or tea? Here, I knitted this for you. No need to return the pie dish. I picked up coloring books for the kids. Where's the laundry? I'm going to fold it while we watch a movie together.* Just keep showing up and saying the next thing and that kind of friendship will wrap itself around our friends' sorrows or joys simply by being willing to be present.

A minimalist line drawing of a chair is positioned on the right side of the page. The chair features a high, slightly curved backrest and a seat with horizontal slats. The drawing is composed of simple black outlines on a background of horizontal ruling lines.