

## Chapter 1

### *First Prayers*

I don't remember a time when I didn't pray. As far back as my memories go, I remember talking to God. That might not seem weird to most people, but I really don't know where I learned to pray—or why I kept praying every night. My family didn't attend church. No one prayed with me before I went to bed. My parents had gone to church growing up, but once they were married and began raising a family, they stopped. Mom blamed me—said every time the preacher stood up to speak, I began crying. So they stopped going to church. Thought they'd wait until I got a little older and could sit through the service quietly. But before that could happen, there was another crying baby. And then another. And another. By the time I was four and a half, I had four brothers. And church became an impossibility for an overwhelmed mom.

I do remember my dad praying. I can see him in my memories, even now, sitting at the head of our kitchen table with the entire family gathered around it. Once Mom had dinner on the table, we would gather and Dad

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would bow his head. With his hands, toughened from hard work, clasped together, he would thank God for the meal. Then everyone would start talking and passing bowls and platters of food. Our mealtimes were loud and full of conversations. A time to reconnect and talk about our day—school, work, and engines (I had four brothers, so lots of conversations centered on engines and cars and things I had no interest in).

My dad had no interest in church, so those dinner-time thank-you-for-this-meal prayers were pretty much the extent of our connection with God. Once, when I asked him if we could read the Bible, Dad gathered my two oldest brothers and his King James Bible. We sat on his bed and began to read. But it was hard to understand. Hard to read. We were just beginning to learn to read at the time, and the words and language were difficult for our elementary-school brains. We grew bored and lost interest and that was the end of that. Yet I felt drawn to God. I wanted to know more about Him.

Truly, “The Lord has appeared of old to me, saying: ‘Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you’ ” (Jeremiah 31:3).

I can still picture one summer afternoon, sitting in the back row with other neighborhood children, gathered under a tree in the front yard of my friend Susan’s home. Every day for a week, a couple of teenagers with an adult mentor came and told stories. One was an exciting story from another place in the world. I don’t remember many

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details except that they would tell the story, and just as it was getting exciting, they'd end the story for the day. To learn what happened, you had to come back the next day. Guess that's how they kept us coming back.

But there was also a second story each day—the exciting, cliff-hanging story—and a story about God. I know they told stories every day for five days, but the only thing I remember from that long-ago summer was the one thing that changed my life. God loved me. *Me*. This scrawny, way-too-shy little girl who didn't think anyone really noticed her. I wasn't the cute baby like my youngest brother, Byron. I wasn't mature beyond my years and already hardworking instead of playing (a value in our childhood home) like my brother, Nile.

I liked to cartwheel and play with dolls and had no interest in cars and engines—which made me a bit of a misfit in my all-guy family.

I was too shy and fearful to try talking to new people. I barely talked to people I knew (something hard for people who know me now to believe!).

I was the kid chosen last for recess kickball and spent most of those outdoor breaks from schoolwork swinging on the swings or climbing the monkey bars with a couple of other nonathletic kids.

I just didn't fit in or measure up to what I thought everyone else wanted. Now I was hearing that God loved me just the way I was. I didn't have to get an A in math (my least favorite subject). I didn't have to practice my

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clarinet (Mom and my music teacher thought I should practice for half an hour every day). God just loved me the way I was.

*Could it be true? Could someone really love me for me?*

I wanted it to be true. I wanted someone to love and accept me. I knew I wasn't perfect or amazing or anything special, but I wanted someone to love me anyway. To notice me. To want to talk to me and listen to me. Really hear me.

So I listened as those teenage summer missionaries invited us to accept Jesus as our Savior, to pray, and to give Him our lives. I was way too shy to go forward when they invited kids to come and pray with them. But I heard what they said and tried to remember everything. Then I ran home to my little bedroom to invite God into my heart.

I remember kneeling by my bed in that upstairs bedroom with the turquoise and pink-flowered wallpaper and praying that first prayer of commitment. I don't remember the exact words, but I did what they said. I confessed to God that I was a sinner and asked Him to forgive my sins, then I told Him that I believed that Jesus had died for me and invited Him to live in my heart forever.

As I got up off my knees, I had this assurance that I now belonged to Him forever. And if it was true that He loved me—me, this awkward, messy little girl who wasn't perfect and who felt like no one else really noticed her—then I wanted to be His girl for the rest of my life.

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I didn't really know what that meant or how to live like His girl, but I began praying every day, believing that He loved me and would guide me.

### **What about you?**

*God loves you too. Just the way you are. You don't have to measure up. You don't have to get it right. He loves you and invites you to commit your life to Him. All you have to do is accept His invitation—a simple prayer, inviting Him to be your God and Savior. He won't reject you. He has already chosen you. Ephesians 1:4–6 promises, “Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son” (The Message).*

*He chose you. He delights in you. He wants a relationship with you. His love will change your life—He's promised.*

*It starts with a simple prayer that begins a friendship that will change your life. It has mine.*