

James in the Suburbs



James in the Suburbs

A Disorderly Parable of the Epistle of James

APRIL LOVE-FORDHAM

With a foreword by
STEPHEN A. HAYNER

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JAMES IN THE SUBURBS
A Disorderly Parable of the Epistle of James

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To Steve, who says I am perfect,
To Brent, who says I am random and spontaneous,
To Kit, who says my brain is *this* big, and
To Sophie, who knows the truth.
You are my heroes and best friends. I love you.

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom:
Enlighten by your Holy Spirit those who teach and those who learn,
That, rejoicing in the knowledge of your truth,
They may worship you and serve you from generation to generation;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,
Forever and ever. Amen.

—*THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER*, P. 261

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Foreword

For years I had a cartoon pinned to the bulletin board over my desk with the caption, “It’s not the parts of the Bible that are unclear that bother me, it’s the parts that are just a little too clear!” Studying the Bible frequently has this sort of effect. It can jolt us to attention, call our focus back to the truth, and reorient our lives. Many have discovered that studying the Bible can be a dangerous thing—that is if you are one who prefers to live life without the meddling inconvenience of God’s light being shined in the corners.

If you do decide to take the risk of exploring what the Bible might have to say, two important steps must be followed.

The first is that it you must actually take the time to study it. Studying the Bible requires some work, because these are ancient texts after all. While it is often surprising how contemporary the scriptures seem to be—describing human interactions and emotions that are all too familiar to us—this is still literature that originated in another time, place, and culture. There is plenty in the Bible that feels strange to us when read through the lens of modern culture and contemporary experience. To understand the Bible requires a certain breadth of knowledge concerning cultural background, historical setting, and linguistic peculiarities. It also requires a feel for the context of the whole Bible and for how the Church has come to interpret it over the centuries.

Many casual readers soon give up, or they defer to those whom they see as experts. My library shelves are crammed with books, which claim to interpret accurately what the Bible says. Over the years, I have learned a great deal from both Bible teachers and preachers and from books about the Bible. But that isn’t the end to what the Bible might want to teach.

Because the Holy Spirit is also at work in the teaching process, it is important to study the Bible directly. This can be done as individuals or in groups. When we study the Bible alone, we are given the opportunity to focus on those particulars to which we are personally drawn, and even to

follow what at first may seem like rabbit trails of interest and application. When we study the Bible with a group, we have that rare opportunity of seeing through the eyes and experiences of others, often discovering things that we wouldn't have discovered alone. Our own experiences can open the doors to insight, but also blind us to seeing what can only be seen through the lens of a different experience or culture.

The Apostle Paul reminds his young protégé, Timothy, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."¹ And he encourages him by saying: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth."²

So making it a discipline to study the Bible diligently is the first step. The second step if we truly want to be transformed by the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit is to take steps to apply what we discover to our attitudes and behaviors. This is actually the harder part of the process. It is, in fact, easily and often avoided.

But the scriptures are clear. Jesus says at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock."³ Note that it is not merely hearing God's word or even understanding it that is the foundation for a well-grounded life. Rather, Jesus says that the wise person takes steps to align his or her life with the truth that is being learned. And on his last night with the disciples before Jesus went to the cross, Jesus told his followers, "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."⁴

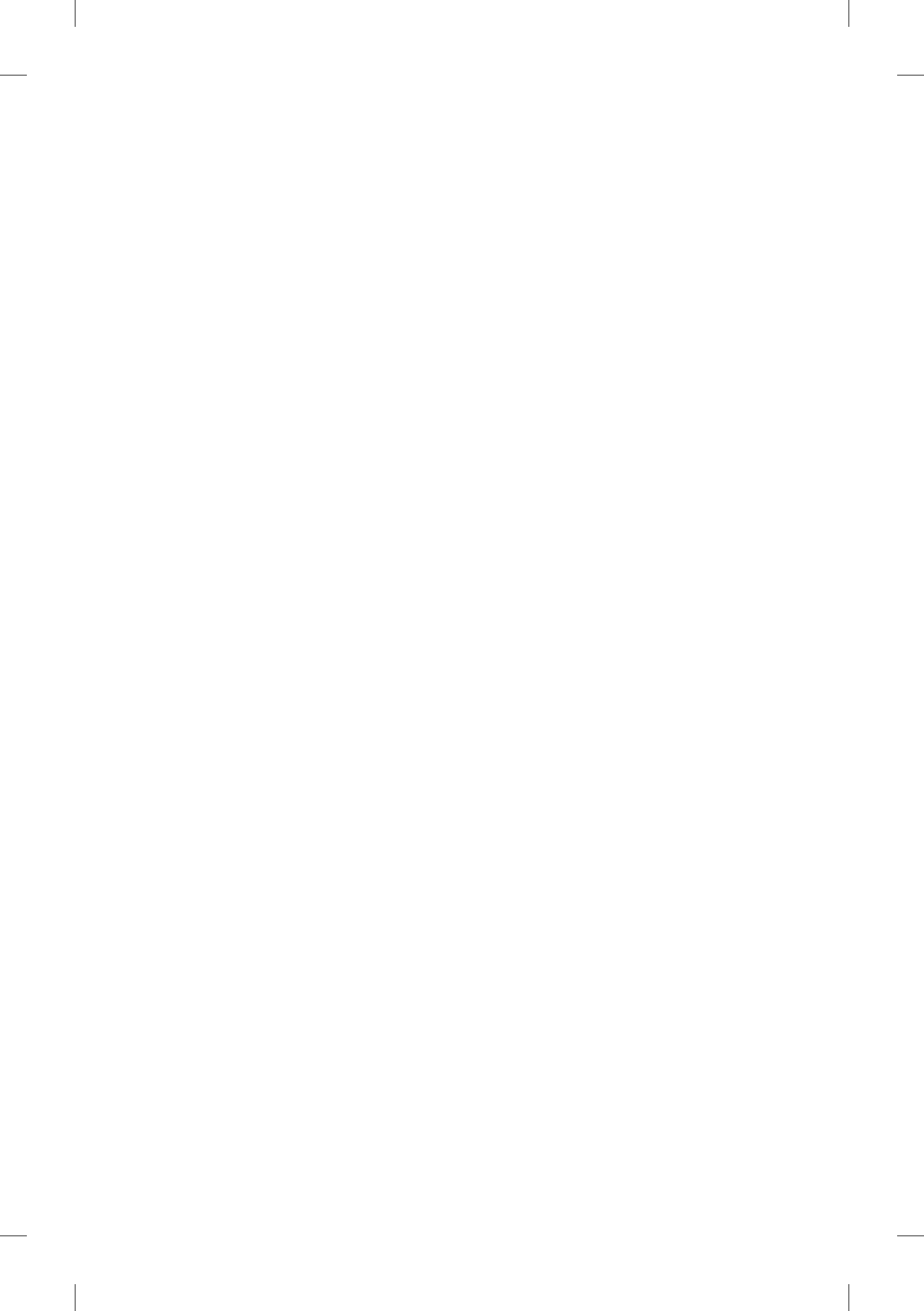
Christians over the centuries have been better at knowing than at doing. Many churches aren't very helpful at this point, because leaders assume that if they just teach people something that they will immediately understand what they are to do, and will want to be obedient. But this "know it—do it" pattern often does little more than leave people smarter but not very transformed.

It is this concern for transformation that is at the heart of Dr. April Love-Fordham's book. You are about to enter into a journey which combines biblical commentary on the Letter of James with parable—the account of an intriguing group of suburban Christians who agree to do a Bible study

1. 2 Tim 3:16–17.
2. 2 Tim 2:15.
3. Matt 7:24.
4. John 13:17.

together. This is the story of how the Holy Spirit can use a study to change people and to help them to take new steps of self-discovery and faith. It is a journey of wonder and sometimes discomfort, not only into what James has to say, but into how his words can transform human lives when we take the time to listen deeply both to the text and to one another. Get ready to dive into the book of James, but also to learn how Bible study can transform your life!

Dr. Stephen A. Hayner
President of Columbia Theological Seminary
Teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA)
Former president of InterVarsity



Preface

Jesus used parables—stories of everyday people—to illustrate spiritual truths. This book is a story of everyday people that illustrates the spiritual truths found in the Epistle of James. If you read this book, you will walk away with both a story that will challenge you, and a thorough understanding of the Epistle of James. There is a study guide in chapter 29 designed both for groups who read the book together and for individuals.

This parable is a true story in the sense that it is a combination of embellished facts. All names, dates, places, events, and details have been changed, invented, and altered for literary effect. The reader should not consider this parable to be about any particular part of my life or any particular community of people. It is a work of literature.

The idea of writing this book came to me as I completed a commentary on the Epistle of James. Quite frankly, afterward, I found it boring to read facts and theories about the epistle—even if they were of my own scholarly effort. I wanted my commentary to grab the readers, immediately relate to their lives, and open the door for the teachings of James to transform them. Having written my doctoral thesis on using biblical storytelling to initiate spiritual transformation, I decided to employ what I had learned to write a unique parable/commentary.¹ My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will use this book to transform not only the life of the suburban church, but churches everywhere.

1. Love-Fordham, “Using Biblical Storytelling in Pastoral Care,” 110–13.



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ministry, especially Diane Summers Baier, Carolyn Christ, Wrenda Crain, Maureen Hill, Sara Anne Johnson, and Keziah Kamau.

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And finally, to Sophie, my enormous black and white spotted Great Dane, who sat by my desk day after day watching me write, who would stand nose to nose with me begging for a walk as I sat at my keyboard, and who would nuzzle her nose between my keyboard and hands when I ignored her. You have been a good friend.

1

You've Been Warned

What follows is just one of the finales of a disorderly parable of the Holy Spirit breathing life into the dead faith of the men and women of a suburban church. The parable meanders through the teachings of the Epistle of James meddling endlessly in the culture of the wealthy and middle class churchgoer. The men and women whose lives unfold in it are forever changed. Therefore, consider this a warning: I guarantee the Holy Spirit wants to meddle in your life too.

Be prepared.

My cell phone erupted into the serene silence of the sanctuary echoing from the ceiling to the crucifix and right back at me. The bubblegum-country ringtone, “This One Is for the Girls,” made me smile. It was a fitting tribute to girls everywhere and an encouragement for them to dream big. Isabella Perez, the teenage all-American Latina beauty, had installed the ringtone on my smart phone just the week before. Bubblegum-country might not be the trending sound most Latina girls her age were attracted to, but it had become the official theme song for *Sueños*, the afterschool club for Latina girls now going on its fifth year at our church. *Sueños* meant dreams—and these girls had dreams in spades! The song had permanently attached itself to us when Helen, one of the founders of *Sueños*, in her usual bebopping way, had sung it to the girls one afternoon while dancing her way through clean up. The song had stuck and each class of girls at *Sueños* taught it to the

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next class. The girls had even choreographed an official *Sueños* line dance to which my husband and I had danced, along with parents and others, at multiple celebrations over the years. So when Isabella asked for my phone to install it, how could I say no?

Sueños's goal was to equip and support the physical, spiritual, and educational needs of Latina girls from preteen into womanhood. It was the brainchild of Olivia and Helen, two very unlikely candidates to lead such a ministry. In fact, they were the most unlikely candidates to lead any ministry. Both, in their own way, had been living the suburban dream with accomplished high-paying careers and children in tow. Until, during a study of the Epistle of James, the Holy Spirit took hold of their lives—and the lives of the other men and women in their study group—and turned them all inside out.

My thoughts jumped to the very first meeting of *Sueños*. Isabella had been only twelve then, and shy. She and her equally beautiful *mamá* had immigrated here illegally just a month before her birth, seventeen years ago. Her mother, who cleaned hotel rooms at the Hyatt in order to afford their tiny one-bedroom apartment in a good school district, had made sure Isabella didn't miss the first meeting. Little did Isabella and the four other young attendees know, Olivia and Helen were more anxious than the girls. Nevertheless, Olivia and Helen put on a great welcome. In truth, all they had to face the girls with was love and the unfailing faith that connecting with these girls was their destiny. They knew nothing about being a Latina pre-teenager growing up in America—nor would they pretend to. They were depending on the girls to teach them. Their Spanish was pathetic at best. Yet, this was no accident and no whim. The two of them knew they were called there to be the humble hands and feet of Jesus to these precious girls at high risk of experiencing violence, abuse, teenage pregnancy, and the ever-spinning cycle of poverty. Convinced that they were on God's mission, what more did they need than love?

I looked down at my phone to see who was calling me. It was Olivia.

"*Hola amiga*," I answered cheerfully.

My words echoed. I was alone in the sanctuary. I went there every Monday morning on the weeks when I would be preaching the following Sunday. I would read the lectionary Scripture and pray for the Holy Spirit to illuminate my sermon preparation that week. Then I would stay a little while meditating in the sunlight that filled the church.

"And to you!" I responded to Olivia's "*Buen día*." My Spanish was still not good and completely unnecessary for this phone call anyway. Olivia and I were as white bread as they came. No response followed, but I could tell the call was still active.

"Are you there?" I asked, confused.

No answer.

"Olivia?" I heard a catch in her breath. "Olivia, is everything okay?"

She could barely get out "Yes."

"Are you crying?" This was baffling, because professionally polished, cool-as-a-cucumber Olivia never ever cried.

"No," she claimed. We both knew she was lying. She followed her "No" quickly with a laugh. A really good laugh. The unearthly kind. The kind filled with overwhelming joy that can't be expressed in any other way. "I better call you back when I can get my words out," she half-whispered, half-choked into the phone.

Standing now and beginning to pace, I laughed, saying, "No way. Do not hang up. Breathe deep!"

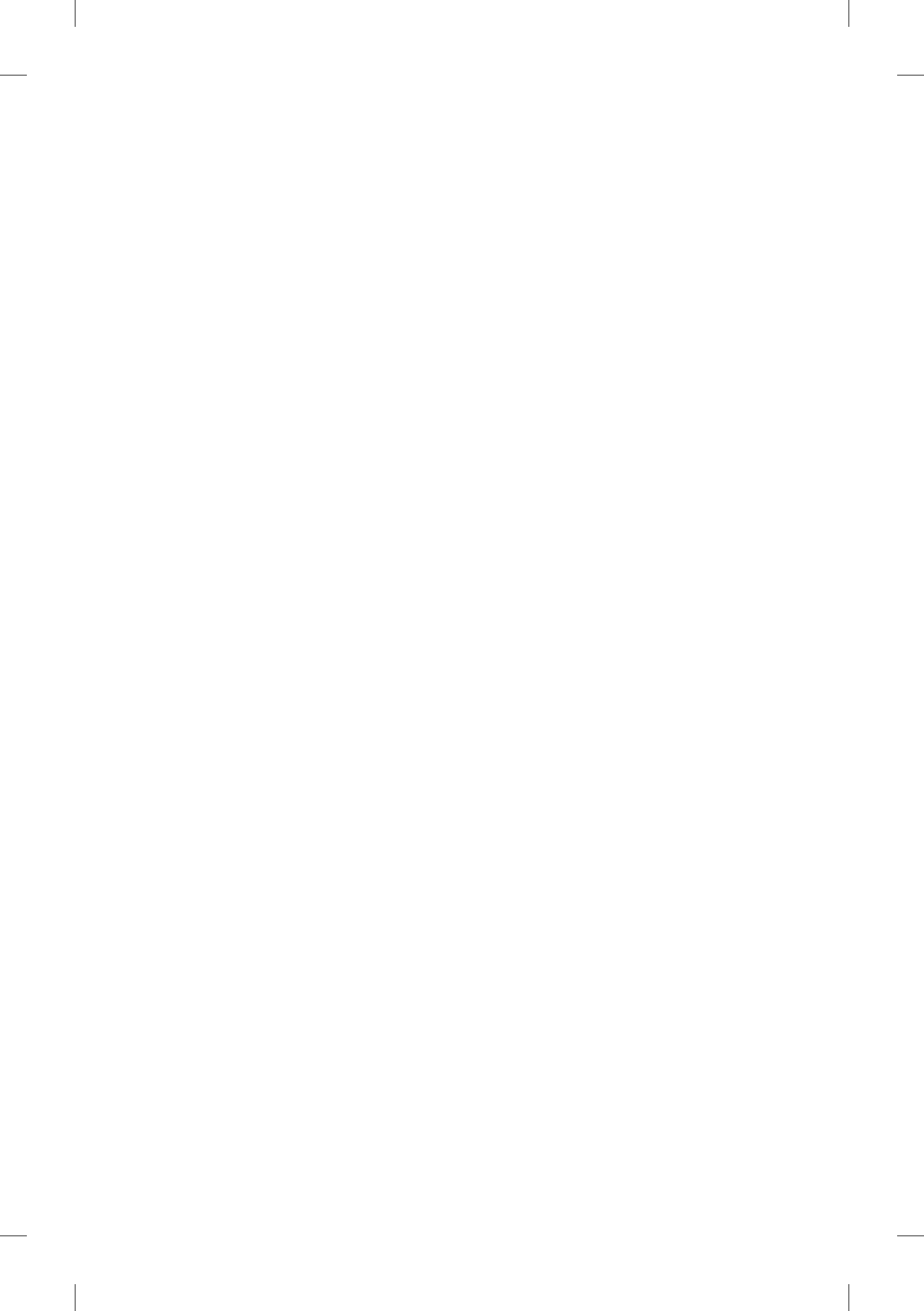
She said okay and told me she was going to put me on mute for a second. I was amused to be able to hear her still. She was breathing in deeply and talking to herself at the same time. Then she would exhale with a high-pitched voice in rapid staccato syllables, "Be calm! Be calm! Be calm!" This was a priceless and humorous insight into the mind of Olivia. While I waited, I wandered from the pew down the aisle toward the crucifix, looking up at it and smiling. I asked God out loud, "What have you done now?"

Finally she spoke. "I had a phone call from the recruiter at Georgia Tech. Both Isabella and Luciana have been sent acceptance letters. And . . . are you ready for this . . . they are getting a combination of merit and need based scholarships!"

Looking back at the crucifix, I mouthed the words, "Thank you!"

It was happening. The dreams of these remarkable young women and their families were coming true. Furthermore, these girls were just the first-fruits. There were now more than a hundred girls and fifty volunteers at three churches across the city, with plans to expand to even more churches. The Holy Spirit's wisdom and power, as promised, had shown up time and time again. And it was obvious that God had no plans to stop.

Now, let's start at the beginning. The journey is important.



PART 1

The Journey to Servanthood

The Parable of the Good Samaritan—Dissecting the Priest

One morning, I ran into my pastor who said, “There was a man who was going down from the city to the suburbs, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by coincidence, I was driving down that road; and when I saw him, I passed by on the other side.”

I asked, “Why did you pass by on the other side without helping him?”

My pastor replied, “I could see the man needed healing, but I don’t know how to heal.”

—ADAPTED FROM LUKE 10:30–37



2

The Church in the Suburbs

All I longed to do was to open one of the old painted-shut office windows and let in some fresh air, but the windows would not budge. I pushed, pulled, and jiggled them side to side. I even took off one of my high-heeled shoes and thumped around their edges. Nothing. These shoes were worthless! I had not bought them because they felt good. They gave me blisters. I bought them because my ankles and feet were the only part of me exposed under my clerical robes. I wanted some part of me—even if it was just my feet—to look stylish and feminine. I stared at the shoes wondering if they were indeed inappropriate. The heels were awfully high.

But before I could decide, I hit the window with them one more time. Nothing. I gave up and stood near the window trying to satisfy myself with a draft of slightly cooler air, which I hoped would seep into my office from around the panes, if the wind would just kick up. Again, nothing—not even a bit of wind. Standing there, I could see below into the shadow-filled courtyard of the adjoining white clapboard church. The gloomy view seemed to confirm that the approaching holidays would be anything but cheery. Congregant after congregant had made appointments to see me that past week. Their grief, loneliness, and anxiety filled my tiny stuffy office. For some reason the week before Thanksgiving—like the week before Christmas—made their problems bigger and their burdens so much heavier than usual. I longed to be cheery, but these people had depressed me more and more as the week had gone on. If I was honest about this, and it should be noted that I didn't want to be honest about this, it wasn't really my congregants who had depressed me, it was my inability to cure their problems that I found so

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depressing. Somehow, I must have missed class the day they taught us how to do miracles in seminary.

We were having a heat wave. The leaves had turned, but the temperature hadn't dipped as much as it should. It was unseasonably warm in Atlanta and extra stuffy inside the church. Nevertheless, the heat wave hadn't stopped those of us in the suburbs from decorating with all the lights and glitter needed to make a spectacular showing of the holiday festivities. Typical of many of the suburbs surrounding Atlanta, the old center of town, usually designated "Main Street," had been restored with artsy boutiques and unique restaurants. The Church in the Suburbs sat on the corner of Church Street and Main. From the church office hallway, I could see across Main Street to the doors of flourishing establishments. There was a trio of singers dressed in black gabardine pants and tapestry jackets embellished with embroidered fall leaves. They stood in an open restaurant door loudly singing out the traditional Thanksgiving hymn "Come, Ye Thankful People, Come." Their music poured into the streets, beckoning "come inside" to those walking to lunch from the office park a few blocks away. I had to admit that the song was appealing, for it promised that all of our wants would be fulfilled. It promised a life of abundance and happiness that I could not conjure up for my hurting congregants. Smells of fresh baked Christmas cookies and hot chocolate from the bakery next door filled the air. I knew, because I caught a whiff every time the church doors opened.

As I walked closer to the window in the hall, my mood began to lighten as I glimpsed another angle of this suburban wonderland. The streets of suburbia on that Friday afternoon were nothing short of idyllic. Expensive late-model sports cars, SUVs, and well-dressed lunch goers littered the street. Even though the air didn't have the nip of the approaching winter, I had no problem pretending that snow was just about to cover the ground, making way in the coming weeks for Santa's sleigh to land with some delightful Christmas presents wrapped up in bows and shiny paper. I wondered how long it would take someone to notice if I were to disappear from my office. A moment strolling down Main Street—just a few precious moments of escape—would have made me feel like a new person.

Before I could run from the dreary church building into the cheerful Friday afternoon, Joe Norman walked into my office without speaking a word. I hadn't expected him, but he wasn't the type who would ever make an appointment. Scheduling an appointment would be admitting that he needed to talk with someone. Joe was a self-made man who had proudly pulled himself up by his own bootstraps. He wasn't going to start being needy now. So instead of making an appointment, he dropped by between

the many appointments of his own and entered my office as if he worked in the room next door and was just passing by on his way to the water cooler.

Joe always made me feel uneasy. I think it was the egocentricity that permeated him that bothered me the most. Seeing me in the hallway, he held out a lanky arm to shake my hand. Taking his hand, I looked up into his eyes. He looked away. Today he looked even older than his seventy years. His six-foot-four inch frame, deeply receding hairline, and his tanned face covered with the appropriate wrinkles served to solidify the fact that he was a man of great accomplishments—a man who demanded that you see him as important and stately. Anyone who failed to comply did so at his or her own peril.

For more than three decades, he had been an entrepreneur, building a worldwide engineering company headquartered in the business park a few blocks away from The Church in the Suburbs. He was a mover and shaker not just in Atlanta, but also around the world. He knew it—to the point of being narcissistic. The newly formed deep circles under his eyes made me suspect that he was struggling with memories of his wife, Annie. Annie had suddenly found out she had cancer two years ago and within a month was gone. I think she may have been the only person in the world for whom Joe could feel empathy and compassion. His reputation for having nothing but contempt for others and readily taking advantage of them was widely known. Although Joe could be charming, it was shallow and superficial. One would think that as uncomfortable as he made me feel, I would have hidden from him, but instead, I found him curious. I actually enjoyed observing him. It was a challenge to try and understand how someone could be so successful in business, yet be so antisocial.

Joe sat down on my small yellow couch, still not looking at me, and stared out the window behind me. He wouldn't normally confide in anyone, and especially not a woman. Moreover, he wasn't going to confide in me now. However, I had been friends with his wife. By talking with me—even small talk—it somehow kept her memory alive a little longer and eased the pain for him. I could tell that his sorrow and loneliness were fresher than the day she had died. Asking how Joe was doing would be an intrusion, so after sitting for a moment in silence, I motioned toward the tie he was wearing and said, "I remember when Annie bought that tie for you. We had gone to lunch at the mall and she saw it in the window of one of the stores."

It was a hideous tie. Cheap and covered with machine embroidered golden retrievers wagging their tails and fetching red balls. It was hardly a tie that a corporate giant would wear. Annie knew this and so did I, which made watching Annie buy it for Joe all the more fun. Annie had it wrapped in serious gift-wrap and gave it to him, swearing me to secrecy that the gift

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was a joke. We both knew he'd hate it, but wear it anyway because Annie was the one person in this world he adored. It was his way of showing her he loved her. Sure enough, he had shown up the next Sunday morning for church with Annie by his side. Annie was smiling mischievously when I caught her eye. Then with one hand hiding the other from Joe, she pointed at the tie quickly looking away from me while stifling a giggle.

At my mention of the tie, Joe looked up at me for the first time and smiled, finishing my thoughts with his version of the story. He told me how the golden retrievers embroidered on it looked like the dog Annie had given him for his sixty-fifth birthday. He loved that dog. In fact, now that Annie was gone, the dog may have been his only trusted friend. He went on to say the dog had treed a cat in the backyard the evening before. Our chitchat wandered around in this way, meandering through memories, until some unknown thing prompted Joe to leave. As he departed, he turned back to look at me and mumbled something that I couldn't make out. Then he lumbered down the hall to the water fountain and back to his office several blocks away.

3

Dream Catcher

My next appointment was waiting unobtrusively for me in the grimly lit jewel-toned reception area. Her wide-eyed glow looked completely out of place. It was Helen Callil, dressed in what I could only describe as classy boho attire. Her edgy short umbra red and black baby doll dress was meant for a teenager—as were her ankle high black boots. However, they suited Helen even though she was nearing thirty. Her shoulder-length brown hair and bright brown eyes were accented by triangle-shaped earrings dangling from her ears. The earrings bounced as she walked side by side with me back to my office. Helen loved to smile. Laughing at things you and I might consider mundane came very easy to her. Even so, the ease of her laughter shouldn't be confused with lack of intelligence. She was unassuming, that was for sure, but not dumb.

She had come to Atlanta from a small town in South Georgia right after high school to attend Agnes Scott, an exclusive all-girls school in Decatur. One fall day during her freshman year, after walking the few blocks from her dorm into quaint downtown Decatur, she had come across a natural foods store. She had been looking for something to combat her newly acquired Atlanta hay fever. The Lebanese man, about a decade older than her, who waited on her not only cured her hay fever, but over the months that followed romanced her into accepting a proposal to become his wife. Much to her racist parents' disappointment, she had left school and married him. She found his Lebanese heritage, his interest in the sometimes mystical alternative medicines, and his gregarious nature mesmerizing. He made up for her slight hint of shyness.

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Together, over the next decade, they had built his one store business into twenty-some stores up and down the East Coast. A few years back, they had moved the store's headquarters and their home from downtown Decatur into the wealthy suburbs in an effort to help their twin toddlers escape from the perils of inner-city living within I-285, the interstate highway circling the perimeter of Atlanta. Building their company together had been fun, especially in the early days when Helen was essential to the expanding business. After the twins were born, she had left running the business to her husband. He was not only a good businessman, but he also tried to be a good husband and father—and most of the time succeeded. She had been a full-time stay-at-home mom for the last five years.

I relaxed at seeing her, thinking this might be a bright point in my day. However, as soon as my door was closed, her happy mask came off and tears began to flow. Helen was going through a bout of misery. Her twin daughters had started all-day kindergarten in the fall. Not only had their school attendance left time on her hands, but people, including her husband, kept asking her when she would be back at work. It wasn't that she did not like the business and it wasn't that she hadn't enjoyed helping her husband run it; it was simply that she wanted to concentrate on her kids.

To complicate things, she felt embarrassed. She was sure that her friends from the Atlanta Business Women's Association were talking about her at their power luncheons. They were probably looking down their noses at what they perceived as her inability to juggle both career and home. The fact of the matter was that she did have extra time on her hands while the kids were at school, and she wanted to fill her free time with something purposeful. She didn't want to be a tennis wife or spend her life at the clubhouse or attend art and fashion events. At the same time, she didn't know what she could do that would make a difference in the world. Her question to me was how she could have, in her words, "a ministry of her own" while the girls were in school.

As we talked, she alternated between pulling on her earrings and twisting an unusually large tourmaline ring around and around her finger. These nervous habits seemed to help her be brave enough to confide in me and ask me for some help. She had some definite ideas about what kind of ministry she was willing to do for God. Actually, it was more about what she wasn't willing to do for God than what she was willing to do. She didn't want to wade into anything too messy like visiting sick people or the elderly unless they were already friends of hers. She liked the idea of doing something with other mothers. She went on with a list of possibilities intermingled with a list of things too outside her comfort zone to take on. After listening for a while, I summarized with an affectionate laugh and said, "Simply put, you'd

like to have a ministry where you could be nice to the nice.” My summary was meant to playfully challenge her, not comfort her. To my surprise, it had the opposite effect.

She immediately quipped, “Exactly! I knew you would understand.”

Her eyes suddenly dried up and began to sparkle again. She thought I had understood. She had no clue I was being facetious. I was hoping that her vision for a ministry, when put the way I had just framed it, would seem a little on the shallow side to her and start her thinking. However, she was giddy with anticipation that by the next time we talked I would have discovered a perfect ministry for her. While I wanted to help, I could tell there was more going on inside Helen than even Helen was aware.

I began to correct Helen’s misconception of how I was going to help when half of Olivia Johnson’s face peered in through the narrow but long rectangular window cut into my office door above the door handle. Upon seeing Helen sitting on my couch, Olivia cleared her throat in order to be noticed. Olivia was the brilliant and aggressive thirty-five-year-old Senior Vice President of Marketing at the engineering company Joe Norman ran. She had recently been given a big promotion and transferred from the Chicago office to the corporate headquarters in Atlanta, where she had promptly joined our church. The Church in the Suburbs was the first church she had ever attended in her life. She was an outsider in more ways than one. She had no idea of the rich Southern history and culture that she disregarded with almost every sentence she uttered. Her Yankee bluntness was not serving her well in the South. It certainly wasn’t making her any friends, but I am not sure she wanted any either. Wrongly, I had enjoyed more than one humorous moment at her expense as she stumbled over herself in the presence of women who were graceful Southern belles, yet whose “grace” was somewhat scary even to me. Obviously not all the Southern belles at The Church in the Suburbs were scary, but there was a group of them who made Scarlet O’Hara look kind and gentle.

Selfishly, I was glad that this group of women was focusing their Southern hospitality on Olivia rather than me. Olivia had yet to figure out that when they followed her comments with “Bless your heart, Olivia,” they weren’t actually offering her a blessing. On the other hand, she didn’t show these women the respect they deserved, either. They were mostly her age—mostly stay-at-home moms with successful professional husbands. Even though these women volunteered to teach her children’s Sunday school classes and run a Vacation Bible School in the summers, Olivia didn’t value their work. For Olivia, volunteer work had no value. It was the paycheck that mattered—and the bigger the paycheck, the better. Money bought you power. And power was important to Olivia.

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