"Reading Megan's debut book feels a lot like the time I first met her in person. My heart sings, 'My friend! I've found her!' and my body relaxes in the relief that I can be myself around her. She has a long history with the Lord, which serves only to benefit us—her readers, her friends. Megan's faith is pure and beautiful and bold and honest. She is not just a ray of light or a breath of fresh air— she is the whole sunrise and the ocean breeze that wakes us up—bringing us hope and fresh space to move into and occupy. She calls us out of the pits we've fallen into (willingly or not) and she does so with the joy and humor of the Lord. Seriously, she is so funny.

I am married with young kids, so I don't 'belong' to the unmarried audience to whom Megan gives voice—but that's the beauty of her testimony—Megan's sharing of faith and Biblical truth transcends the categories of belonging our culture is so obsessed with putting everyone into. She gives us all the gift of the simple gospel—freeing us from the confines and false security of titles and allowing us to walk in the joy and adventure of who God created us to be - exactly where we're at in life."

-Kate Kiesel, I Would Live for You, Punchline Publishing

"How does a single woman thrive in the marriage culture of today's church? Megan E. Faulkner answers that question with authenticity as she shares her journey of using God's truth to replace the lie that she's 'not enough.' She's practical, funny, honest, and upbeat, and she gives a great checklist at the end of each chapter on how to flourish as a single woman of God in a married world. Her easy-to-read, welcoming style will inform, encourage, and challenge all women, single or married."

Warren Bird, Author/Coauthor of 34 books including
 Hero Maker, Zondervan, and Michelle Zwicker Bird,
 Leader for 30 years of women's Bible studies and discipleship

"Megan Faulkner didn't want to write this book. But God . . . She had been in the pit. But God . . . She was deconstructing what she thought she didn't have. But God . . . She was living in what-was-supposed-to-be for too long. But God . . . Megan is telling her own story with such honesty, vulnerability and authenticity and a huge healthy dose of humor. All the while allowing us, the readers, to realize we have our own stories to tell, stories that can be filled with purpose because God is present."

—Maggie Robbins, Co-author with Duffy Robbins of Enjoy the Silence, Zondervan, and Certified Spiritual Director

"Have you ever felt incomplete just as you are? Then this book is for you. Megan beautifully invites readers to grapple with the deep questions of our God-given purpose in a world that constantly throws comparison, hopelessness, and fear at us. She invites us to step into the freedom bought through the precious blood of Jesus Christ in a way that will make you laugh and cry. This book will change you for the better."

—Jenna Shotmeyer, Author Are You Drowning? Overcoming in the Midst of Trauma and Loss

"In an engaging, meaningful and creative manner, this book offers incredible encouragement to single women of all ages. Megan's personal stories and gems from the Bible show how to transform pitfalls into purpose, revealing secrets to living the best life regardless of expectations or relational status."

—Pastor Raphael and Aly Giglio, Soul or the Spirit: Knowing the Difference Can Change Your Life

HAPPILY EVER After All

On-Purpose Living in a Fairytale World



MEGAN E. FAULKNER

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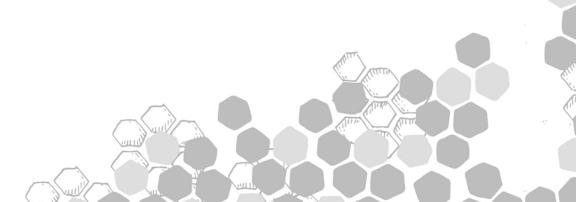
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To my Mom and Dad, who believe in my dreams more than I do.

Some things are wildly unrelenting, and
your love is at the top of that list. I love you!

To Hailey, Evelyn, Nicholas, and their parents,
While Author is a title I've dreamt of forever,
Sister and Aunt will always beat it.
You are my favorite people. I love you!

To every girl who has cried on her bathroom floor,

I know that ache.

This is for you.



Contents

Introduction: Love and Other Stories	ix
Chapter 1 - Stuck in the Pit	1
Chapter 2 - Little Girls' Dreams	11
Chapter 3 - Shame	19
Chapter 4 - Owning It	29
Chapter 5 - Family Ties	37
Chapter 6 - FWB: Friends with Babies	45
Chapter 7 - Dating: Persistent Widow Vibes	55
Chapter 8 - Created for Community	65
Chapter 9 - Where Do I Fit?	73
Chapter 10 - Where Is God?	83
Chapter 11 - Pursuing Peace	89
Chapter 12 - So Now What?	99
Acknowledgments	107
Author Bio	111
Notes	113

INTRODUCTION

Love and Other Stories

I did not want to write this book. How's that for an opener? In fact, I had an entirely different story line in my head, an outline written out, and a lot of the book that I did want to write already accomplished. Even in this, I'm not getting my way. (Have you ever felt that way in your life? Maybe that's why you're reading this right now.) I'm just simply not getting my way. If I were a toddler, I would be throwing a temper tantrum in the middle of the grocery aisle; but my toddler days are long gone and I don't currently have one of those either—a toddler, that is. So here I am: thirty-something, unmarried, and no toddler. What good am I to the world? Are you in the same boat? Have you ever thought—what good am I to the world? That's why we're all here: to figure it out together. I'm glad you're here.

Here's what I want to tell you most before anything else: being unmarried is not an affliction. (Just so we're all on the same page.) No one needs to feel sorry for the unmarried women—we're fine. We're not dying; we're living, or well, we're trying to—if people would let us. Yikes, right? Well, just hear me out. The unending questions and comments from married people in Christian culture such as "Don't you want to be married already?" "Why aren't you married yet?" and "The clock is ticking!" echo in the walls of our heads for days after they're said to us.

The truth is that there is a purpose in everything and that's what we're here to discover. What is the purpose in each of these situations we find ourselves in as unmarried women in Christian culture?

Rachel and Ross. Jay Z and Beyonce. Steph and Alicia Curry. John Legend and Chrissy Teigen. Viola Davis and Julius Tennon. Noah and Allie. Corey and Topanga. Phil and Claire. Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds. All stories of love and marriage, and sometimes babies. People whose stories our society has collectively grown to love, follow, and adore. Christians have our own versions of these stories: Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Ruth and Boaz, your pastor and their spouse, and many other famous Christian couples we follow starryeyed, thinking that's *exactly* how it's supposed to happen. Some of us dream, hope, and pray for a similarly great story one day.

But for many of us, it doesn't happen. Life doesn't look how we thought it should look, and our stories are drastically different from the ones we read about in fairytales. We begin comparing our lives to our friends' lives and wonder what is wrong with us. Everyone is getting married and having babies while we're still in the same place we've been for an exceptionally long time, or so it seems. Their highlight reels begin to take center stage in our minds while we muck through the reality of our behind-the-scenes. We get trapped in making comparisons, and the self-judgment feels like a never-ending roller coaster. We get stuck in the vicious cycle of thinking about what they have and what we don't. Our stories are ever evolving, but we're not certain they're evolving the way we want them to. We compare the purpose of our lives and feel behind, lost, hopeless, and maybe even stuck.

The comparison trap is one of the greatest traps of all time. Comparing our lives to the lives of others often robs us of our joy, disillusions us with the reality of disappointed expectations, makes us feel unsatisfied with our current place in life, and communicates lies to our hearts that can take root and leave us tangled. The comparison trap is just that: a trap. A trap is *a trick by which someone is misled into acting contrary to their*

interests or intentions, or an unpleasant situation from which it is hard to escape. Comparison traps us into thinking we've done something wrong, or, worse yet, we are wrong. The lies that comparison communicates are the opposite of the things God wants for us, especially when it comes to our life's purpose. Another way we can think of comparison is as a pitfall. It's something that catches us, buries us, and is difficult to escape from without some hard work.

Freedom is on the other side of the pitfall of comparison. While comparison lies say things like, "You're not where you're supposed to be," God combats those lies with sentiments like, "I have every one of your steps numbered and I am with you always." I know so many of us struggle with believing the lies that come from the mouth of the comparison trap. It's a dangerous place to try to receive our information and validation. The mouth of God is the only place to receive our true identity. God says that we are loved, chosen, accepted, wanted by Him, redeemed, and created for a purpose.

God's Word, the Bible, is filled with stories of women and men whose lives each looked drastically different from others'. No two stories are the same, yet we continue to draw our own parallels to the lives of our friends and neighbors in this modern day. As Christians, we are called to live in freedom and to do so abundantly. Abundant free living doesn't look like comparing ourselves to our friends, and it certainly doesn't only exist within the construct of marriage. Abundant and free living looks like being surrendered to Jesus, the Savior of the world, and seeking the will of God regularly. A life of abundance and a life of freedom doesn't come from reaching the world's social goals of marriage and children; it comes from living a beautiful life surrendered to a God who loves us, cares for us, and has better plans for our lives than we could ever make up for ourselves. It seems to be that everybody thinks unmarried Christian women are incomplete, but that's not true-we are fully complete because of Jesus, wholly alive, and purposed for greatness.

Living a great story does not only look like a husband, two kids, a white picket fence, and a dog. It doesn't look like being a billionaire or even a millionaire. Living a great story doesn't look like the perfect car, the perfect haircut (did I go a little too far?), or the perfect job. What does it look like to you? I think it looks like training for the most epic race of your life with skinned up knees, bruises, scars, and bright-eyed smiles. It smells like summer rain, spring flowers, winter fires, and fall hayrides. It feels like sand under your feet, freshly cut grass, and holding the hand of someone you adore. It tastes like cold ice cream on a hot summer day, like hot coffee on the coldest morning, and like the best pizza on this side of the Mississippi. It sounds like the good kind of laughter—you know the one I'm talking about, the one from your belly. It sounds like silence to the ones who like the quiet and noise to the ones who don't. It looks big and bright and bold and beautiful, and it's reflective of calling and persistence and kindness and goodness. It feels holy, and faithful, and slow, and right. Living a great story looks like whatever each of our individual stories are—not just a cookie cutter calling. My story is not yours, and your story is not mine—and isn't that what's so beautifully wild about it all? We're not the same. We're not called to sameness—and that's why this book exists. I had this ache of shame because I was not the same. The shame lied to me, it held me back, and it didn't let me live.

Simply put, a great story is one filled with purpose. And friend, purpose is something you do have. We'll continue to talk about purpose in each chapter, and hopefully we'll be encouraged along the way that our stories are *good*—regardless of our marital status.

This Book is for You

If you're unmarried and reading this book: Welcome, friend! I'm glad you're here. This is for you. No, really, it's *for* you. I want you to feel the freedom to say things that maybe no one has said before, or that maybe no one has given you the freedom to express prior to this message. In this

book, friend, I pray you find that freedom. I pray these pages sink into your bones; your heart swells in size; and you feel seen, known, loved, and heard. You matter to the world. You have a purpose here, and I'm glad we're here together.

I'm not sure what lies you've heard or are believing, or what words said by others have etched their way into the walls of your heart, but the prayer for this book is that you will find hope and purpose here. Your marital status, dating status, or any other status for that matter, have very little—or absolutely nothing—to do with your purpose. You don't have more or less purpose because of your marital status; you have purpose today simply because there is breath in your lungs and your heart is still beating.

Looking Ahead

Each chapter ahead is written as a letter to you to help you navigate your purpose in that specific facet of life. You'll read stories, gain some wisdom, and hopefully feel seen, known, and heard! We'll talk about a pitfall in the respective situation and then move towards climbing out of that thinking and shifting our perspective to purpose. Then—something fun!

My friend Kelly and I love lists. She's one of the only other people in the entire universe whose lists I know rival mine. We especially love a checklist. We started running together and each time we run, we give ourselves a checkmark. We eventually decided we also needed prizes; now things that bring us joy come into play after we gain so many checkmarks on our lists. If our goal is to *thrive*, not just survive, in this culture where we live, we're going to need to check some things off our list. We cannot sit still and expect change. We must take action and move forward; and sometimes, making lists can help! At the end of each chapter, you'll find a checklist. Use the checklist to your advantage. I've tried to make them practical for you, but also fun. I'm not doing much without fun.

While the journey through these pages might bring up some uncomfortable feelings and initiate some difficult conversations, we're going to have fun together in the in-between. Maybe you'll cry, but maybe you'll also laugh. Most of all, I hope you'll feel free. Check it off, sister! (Kelly recommends prizes!)

Here are all the letters to all the unmarried women in all the situations where you find yourself: may they reach you, meet you, and fill you with hope. It is time for us to live abundantly and to live free. It is time for the chains of comparison to fall to the wayside and the pitfalls to become purposeful so we can live out our callings free of the shame that comparison brings. It's time for women to be valued socially and in the Church regardless of our marital status or ability to reproduce. It's time to live in expectation of *what* is next, not *who* is next. It's time, because who says a happily ever after that includes a spouse is the goal, after all?

CHAPTER 1

Stuck in the Pit



PITFALL THINKING

If I'm in the pit now, I'll always be in the pit. This is just my life.

PURPOSE THINKING

I can make progress toward living an abundant, purposeful life.

Sweet friend,



Have you ever heard of the Greatest Commandment? If you haven't, it reads something like this:

"Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'[c] This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'[d] All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Matthew 22:34-40 NIV

I want to tell you why this commandment is so important to our lives in this season. But first, a story:

It was the hottest day to date in July and I was carefully picking up tiny shards of broken glass. A vase had fallen from a corner cabinet and shattered, sending glass to every inch of my sink and the surrounding countertops. The house was quiet except for me, joyfully laughing, picking up each tiny piece. It doesn't seem like a scenario in which to laugh unless you're me; this is how I knew I was healed and free, finally living my purpose.

If this same scenario had played out just two years prior, I would have left the glass there and not used my sink for the foreseeable future. I would have pretended like it was going to magically clean itself up and ignored it entirely. That flawed thinking had become my battle cry: This isn't happening, this can't be happening. This is just my life. I will be in this pit forever! I had been through some seasons that felt like torture, and therefore, I began to suppress, isolate, ignore, and surrender to a life of depression. I was stuck.

Maybe you've felt stuck in that pitfall before, or maybe you're stuck now, and your sink is full of tiny shards of glass waiting to be cleaned up. Have you had a hard time making a decision? Can't decide where to go next on a project or a dream? Have you given up on something you know was for you, or at least, you thought was for you? Is your life mundane, systematic, and repetitive? Does your mind dictate your next move, not allowing the heart any input? Are you stuck in a career, stuck in a mindset, stuck in a pattern of thinking that isn't free, stuck in a cycle of toxicity, stuck in your own way? Friend, this is a problem, but we can climb out together. Let's keep going.

STUCK; 1. adjective; *caught or fixed* as in "stuck in the mud." 2. adjective; *baffled*

"This problem has me completely stuck." Stuck describes something that's frozen or fixed in one place and can't be moved. If your foot gets stuck in the mud, it means you can't get your foot out of its messy trap. The lid of a jar can be stuck, and your car can get stuck in traffic; either way, the thing that's stuck isn't going anywhere. You can also use stuck when you can't figure out what to do: you can be stuck on an especially hard math problem or feel stuck in a complicated relationship.

Stuck. Dwelling somewhere we shouldn't. Past tense. No movement. Unable to proceed. Fixed in place.

We are not meant to live stuck in the pit. We are created to live free.

When we surrender to God's ultimate design for each of our lives, freedom becomes the supreme battle cry. When we can shift one foot out of the cement holding us in place and toward movement, *stuck* doesn't get the majority of the say. If we can seek healing, reframe our thinking, and remember our dreams, being stuck becomes a thing of the past and progress towards purpose becomes our medal.

Your stuck might not seem important to move out of quickly; but maybe you're stuck on your next move. Maybe you love your career but want to make progress towards excellence. Maybe you're stuck in a relational decision and need to work it through, or you're stuck in an unhealthy family or work system that you want to help guide toward movement. I think if we're not careful, we can all be stuck in, or on, something. My stuck was not a stuck I ever imagined or asked for, knew how to deal with, or understood.

I was fixed, alright—perhaps even fixated. Why could I not accomplish this goal of marriage that was set before me by, well, just about everyone in my world? Why did I feel less-than because others' expectations of my life were not being met? Or was it that my expectations for my own life were also not being met? Why was everyone so obsessed with finding someone to share their life with and not just building a life they were proud of? Or was I also obsessed with it? When we're in this situation, our lives can become constant discussions and suggestions around the next right suitor, and the "what happened" discussions fill the airwaves after dates or even a match on a dating app! It's no wonder we feel left behind if we're not accomplishing these goals. We're not the only ones obsessed with the goal of relationship—everyone around us seemingly is, too!

I was stuck alone, everywhere, and the pain of that loneliness forced me to face some really hard questions.

Who told you everyone gets married?

Why is that the goal in life?

Who decided that the married way is the only way to live a fulfilled life?

It was a painful reckoning, and one that still requires revisiting sometimes—reminding myself and encouraging others through.

Back to the Vase

Why was it a situation in which to laugh? Because *pitfall thinking Megan* would have left the shattered glass right there, not dealing with one

more thing that wasn't going my way. But I laughed, and I noticed the laugh. Why? Because *purpose-thinking Megan* had finally arrived on the scene. I was healed from being stuck in the pit, and I knew it based on my willing-to-clean-up-the-vase-right-away actions.

Late 2020, three months after laughing over the shattered vase, I woke up on an early fall Saturday morning to an incredible view. My two best friends and I spent a Friday night in the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania catching our collective breath. We branded it as "Megan's Birthday Party," which was celebrated with all my favorite things. But we all like the same stuff anyway, so it worked out for everyone, I think!

We spent time laughing; sharing stories; reliving college days, high school days, and even childhood days; eating too much charcuterie; and sitting in the hot tub splashing around like we were twelve. It was soul-nourishing.

I drove home Saturday afternoon, the first day of my new year of life, full of happiness and also lots of cheese. (They're the same thing, no?)

I do not know a lot, but this is what I do know: not one soul in the world thought these years would go how they're going. Who imagined a global pandemic, political chaos, overwhelmingly tense feelings everywhere you go, immense racial inequality in America coming to the surface needing to be confronted, and a toilet paper shortage? And for me—and maybe you, too—I navigated it mostly alone. I didn't process these years in the quiet of the night with anyone as we waited to fall asleep. I just had my own thoughts—and maybe a few texts. I never imagined it would be this way.

I drove along the highway home—reliving the past year of my life, celebrating the victories, and sobbing at the sadness. That's right, I cry hard and drive carefully. *See me for multitasking tips and tricks!* I experienced incredible pain that year, but I also experienced the freedom that comes with healing. The drive home allowed me to think through the processes that made me into who I was that very day, celebrate doing the hard work of seeking vision, creating a close and prayerful circle of confidants, and making decisions that simultaneously broke my heart

and set me free. My heart was breaking for the life I thought I was going to have, yet didn't, and that brokenness also set me free into the life and purpose I could now pursue.

This is what I know: I am okay. This was the conclusion of my drive home from the mountains. While this might not sound like a big deal to you, I had lived the previous four years of my life thinking I may never be okay again. I had battled—and I mean, *battled*—some mean beasts; all while being entrusted with ministries, domestic and foreign; creating community; reframing my thinking about a life I thought I was going to have by now; and trying to just make it through the day. In seeking healing, I received it. I have never felt more happy, free, and confident in my life. I was healed and whole; my battle had been won.

I began to work hard. I begged, pleaded, prayed, journaled, and read. I saw the most incredible Christian therapist, had difficult conversations, sought forgiveness, forgave, and reconciled. I worked hard to eliminate ego, increased my time with God, rearranged my schedule, incorporated a true Sabbath and protected it. I set boundaries and kept them and started telling the whole truth. The journey to this healing started when my pastor/boss walked into my office one day eighteen months prior and said, "I don't know how to ask you this, but are you okay?" I sobbed. "No," I replied. "But I don't know why." He sat and listened, prayed for me, and said, "However I can support you, just tell me." Those became the eight most important words after "Do you want to know Jesus?" of my whole life.

Most of my adulthood has felt like big dreams realized and big dreams s h a t t e r e d, sometimes all at once. I have experienced incredibly high highs and some of the lowest of lows of my life, but I am okay. Why? Because even when I didn't deserve it, Jesus showed up for me. He arrived in the form of friends and neighbors, bright sunny days and blue skies, time alone with Him, and fresh pages of a journal. We are quick to run to the things we think will make us feel better: money, relationships, notoriety, social media likes, power, food—the list could

go on. But God... nothing can heal the things that are meant for only Him to heal. He brought me right out of the pit and into a purposeful life with Him. Just as in Psalm 40:2, David writes: "He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand."

He is waiting for us to seek His will, His desires, and His plans for our lives. Often while we're busy crying in the corner, wondering why things aren't going well, we realize we hadn't invited Him into them in the first place.

Back to the greatest commandment-this, my sweet friend, is our whole life's purpose. The purpose of life is not to be married; the purpose of life is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. When we are stuck, it is seemingly impossible to accomplish this. Being married is not the end-all and be-all of life; obedience is. Jesus came for us so we could have life and have it abundantly. Staying stuck does not produce abundance. Furthermore, when we're stuck, it's almost impossible to love our neighbors well because we don't necessarily love ourselves well. We try to love ourselves well, but we end up loving ourselves with our broken heart, and a wounded soul, and a tormented mindmind—and then we love our neighbors through that lens. If we're not healed and whole and loving ourselves well, it is incredibly hard to live out our purpose in its fullness and love our neighbors well, too. So, if we can seek healing for our stuck-ness, if we're looking to get out from the traps and pitfalls, if we can live in a place with the Lord where we are engaging in abundant love with our hearts and souls and mind, we can love our neighbors better, because we love ourselves as He loves us.

I've spent most of my adult life living in resentment and feeling left. Maybe you've felt the same way? My friends were marrying the people of their dreams, creating the cutest families ever known to earth, and purchasing white picket fences (quite literally!). I grew up thinking that's

what I always wanted for two reasons: that's what I was told I wanted and that's what I did want! I still want to be married and have my own family—truly, it is the only thing I feel like I don't have in life—but now I will only pursue that path if it's the obedient and right thing to do. I am so done fighting God on this. It's exhausting. He always wins, and I always cry. I've spent the last four years deconstructing what I thought I didn't have and realizing what I do.

Through the wise counsel of my team at work, the epic questions from an amazing Christian therapist, and the constant support of my family and best friends, I've been able to realize that I've hit some home runs in life while I thought I was just sitting on the bench! What freedom is in that realization. I haven't been benched at all; I've been batting and swinging and hitting and running and accomplishing things for the Team that I wouldn't have been able to otherwise. In regaining perspective, I was able to surrender, to rid myself of resentments and to see the joy once again in this epic journey.

I'm wondering if you're in need of the encouragement of surrender today. Are you holding onto things that weren't meant for you? Are you clinging to a life that isn't yet, instead of surrendering to a life of what could be? Are you operating on your own timeline or the timeline the world puts on you? I lived in what was supposed-to-be for so long I missed out on what-is-now. I don't want you to miss out, too.

Author and podcaster Annie F. Downs once wrote in an Instagram caption: "In the musical Les Mis[erables], Fantine sings a song that says, '... now life has killed the dream I dreamed.' (She had just been fired from her job at the factory and thrown onto the streets. Things were not going exactly according to her plan. She is thinking back to happier days and she's wondering how everything has gone wrong in her life.) And in my story, that's been true a few times. (Yours too probably, right?) Big LIFE ones and 2020 ones and little daily ones. But when the song stops, our lives don't, and also? That song doesn't factor in God's kindness. Your life, your year, may not look the way you thought it would (mine either!) some dreams may have died, but some new dreams have

grown . . . and there's SO MUCH FUN when you are given what you didn't know to dream up."

My encouragement for you today, friend, is to be open to the dreams God has for you—the ones you don't even know about: the married ones and the unmarried ones, the career ones and the personal ones, the social ones, and the emotional ones. I didn't think I would find my dreams again on these past few trips around the sun, but I did, and it's been better than I could have ever imagined. There is freedom in surrender, peace in absolute uncertainty, and calm in the chaos if we choose it.

I want to challenge you today to:

- ... see your dreams,
- ... find the peace amidst the storm,
- ... seek Jesus instead of whatever else you're looking to for satisfaction,
- ... ask for healing where you need to be healed,
- ... commit to a process of betterment if you're in the pit,
- ... and to choose to see, or actively look for, the joy in the journey.

He is here waiting for you. Will you submit to Him today? In this book? Through these letters? Will you let go of whatever is causing you angst and admit that His plans are best? Will you choose to surrender, to open your hand, and to reimagine what a life full of Him could look like? This reimagining brings us back to the purpose of our lives: loving Him and loving others. Let's turn the page and walk through this beautiful life together, thriving. Let's start at the very beginning. You can make progress toward living an abundant, stuck-free life.

I promise it's good. It's not always pretty. But it *is* always good.

let's get started, Megan

ESCAPING THE PIT CHECKLIST

Decide to get out of the pit. (Picking this book up is a good start!)

Call a trusted friend to tell them you're in the pit.

Decide what ONE thing you will do this week to gain forward movement.

Write out (or talk through, if you're braver than me!) a list of resentments you're holding onto.

Take a walk and drink some water.

