

RUN for COVER

Finding Intimacy
in the Presence of God

RHEA BRISCOE



Run for Cover

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Photo of author by Brandon Hook

Dedication

This book is lovingly dedicated to Anna Mae Bickhart, the one who instilled in me a love for the Word of God, consistently modeled faithfulness before me and taught me to run for cover and take shelter in the trustworthiness of God. Thank you for taking a little girl and stirring up the gift of God that was in her—your labor has not been in vain.

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Preface

For those of you who don't know me, permit me to introduce myself. I am an itinerant minister who travels extensively, ministering the love of God and preaching the truth of His Word through Snowdrop Ministries. I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for I am absolutely convinced that it is the power of God unto salvation. My life is evidence of His power at work, and I pray that the book that you hold in your hands substantiates that power in even greater measure.

I am a pastor's wife, married to the most tender shepherd I have ever known. He is a mighty man of God who loves me and his Lord deeply. I am grateful.

I am incredibly blessed to be the mother/stepmother of seven children. They are polished arrows in my quiver, and I am thankful. I pray every day that the Lord uses them for His glory and makes them mighty weapons of warfare for His kingdom. All seven of them have stolen my heart, and each one is a tremendous gift to me from God. I am honored to be their mother.

I am a woman with a past that she's not proud of living in a present that she knows has been redeemed. My life testifies to God's overcoming power and His ability to bring beauty from the ashes of our lives. He truly is a redeemer and deliverer—a close investigation of my life proves that fact.

I am first and foremost a lover of God, and I pray that my life is a reflection of Him in everything that I say and do.

I am not kooky, nor do I fall for “every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). I am a blood-bought child of God who passionately studies His Word to show myself “as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). I want nothing more in my life than to bring God glory and to represent Him with authenticity and a pure heart. I aim to live a life like Nathanael in which God can affirm that I am one in whom there is nothing false (see John 1:47).

The book that you hold in your hand was written after I taught an extensive study on Psalm 91. The truths that God unveiled to me while studying this passage have changed thousands, and I pray that they will affect your life deeply as well. Please keep in mind that this is not an exegetical treatment of Psalm 91 from a theological scholar. It is simply my personal revelation and insight. I pray that it’s a blessing to you.

Please don’t think it accidental that you have chosen to read this book. I have prayed for you, the reader, asking God to reveal Himself to you at deep levels as you meditate on the truths that you will find in these pages. Be expectant as you read, for Scripture promises that those who hope in the Lord will not be disappointed (see Isa. 49:23). His Word is “living and active” (Heb. 4:12). I have purposefully saturated this book with His Word, because I know that my words do not hold power, but His words are the words of eternal life (see John 6:68).

Now may God “give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation” as you read “so that you may know him better” (Eph. 1:17, *NIV*). I pray that you will encounter God in this book in a way that you never have before. Be blessed and encouraged as you listen for His voice in the pages that follow.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, to my heavenly Father, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, to the One my soul loves, I am deeply humbled and undone by Your goodness to me. Thank You, gracious Father, is all I can say. My heart overflows with thanksgiving for all You have done and all You are doing. How I want You to receive glory and honor and praise from my life and from the pages of this book. Be glorified, my King, and draw each person who picks up this book to your magnificent self. Amplify and anoint each word with your sweet Holy Spirit, and grant each reader a sense of Your powerful presence as he or she digests the words on these pages. I love You with my whole self and long to see Your kingdom come and Your purposes revealed on this earth. “Maranatha” is my heart’s cry; come quickly, I pray, Lord Jesus.

To my precious husband, Dave: Thank you for loving me the way you do. You are a constant reminder to me that God can restore the years the locusts have eaten, that He gives beauty for ashes and that He will always take what the Enemy means for evil and use it for good. He did that for me when He brought you into my life! I see Jesus in you at every turn. You are a wonderful father, an incredible husband and the most tender shepherd I have ever known. Thank you for loving Jesus the way you do. There aren’t enough words in this world to describe the love that I have for you. I’m so proud to be your wife.

To my children—Danny, Tyler, Mike, Christy, David, Brooke and Kendal—and to my precious son-in-love, Steve: Psalm 127:3-5 says, “Children are a heritage from the LORD. . . . Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them” (NIV). My quiver is full, and each one of you is a gift from God to me. I love you so very much. I pray daily for you that you will be taught by the Lord, that your peace will be great and that you will know His power and presence all the days of your life. I am so deeply proud of each one of you. May you always know that you are accepted by the Beloved—dearly loved by Him—and that there is no safer place than the shelter of the Most High God.

To my father, Richard Shaffer, the man who raised me and taught me what unconditional love and acceptance truly means: Your love for me gave me a glimpse of my heavenly Father. You will never know what your sacrificial love and unselfish commitment has meant to me. I pray that when you walk through the gates of heaven, you hear His “Well done.” I love you dearly, Daddy.

To Stuart and Jill: Thank you, first and foremost, for the gift of your son. He is God’s biggest blessing in my life, and I promise you, I will love him forever and honor him always. Thank you for the way you model godliness before me—for the way you love me and radiate Jesus to me. Stuart, you always believed that there was a book in me. Thank you for calling it forth and for encouraging me in the call of God on my life. I love you and Jill so much.

To Rick, Pickle, Robin, Ron and Denise, my precious nieces and nephews, and to their children: You are the epitome of family, and I love you all so much. Thank you for your love and support. You teach me about loyal love and undying commitment. I’m so glad that I was born into your family.

To Leslie Hook: You are my Jonathan—my armor bearer and my dearest friend. Words can’t summarize my thankfulness for you and for all you do. Your covenant friendship is priceless to me. Thank you for believing in me and for believing in the call of God on my life. I

love you dearly and am eternally grateful for you and for your service to the Lord. You, without a doubt, give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, and I'm so thankful to be co-laboring with you. Two are better than one. We are a side-by-side, dearly loved dynamic duo. Anthony and Susie down the street think so too.

To Don Hook: Humility and a servant's heart describe you best. Thank you for your commitment to Snowdrop Ministries. God sees what you do so faithfully and quietly behind the scenes to promote His kingdom. Proverbs 28:20 says, "A faithful man will abound with blessings." I pray that you abound greatly, my friend.

To the Monday night Bible study team—Jill, Karen K., Karen M., Karen V., Kelsey, Leah and Sandy: You are indeed watchmen on the wall. Thank you for being co-laborers in the gospel with me, for your undying service, for your tireless commitment to the Lord's work and for your passionate desire to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ. You are the real deal! I love ministering beside you, and I'm so grateful for each one of you.

To the Aline United Methodist Church: They say that it takes a village to raise a child. Thank you for raising me in the fear and admonition of the Lord.

Introduction: The Vision

I was enjoying a weekend at home—a much-welcomed rarity for me, since I traveled nearly every weekend as an itinerant minister. I had spoken at a local event on Saturday and now, on Sunday morning, I was looking forward to attending worship service with my husband and daughter and then spending a leisurely afternoon at home with them.

My husband, Dave, serves as a pastor at Elmbrook Church in Brookfield, Wisconsin. In addition to his normal workweek, he ministers at the Saturday evening service as well as our three Sunday morning services. This particular weekend he and our youngest daughter, Kendal, quietly slipped out of the house in the early morning hours while I slept soundly and went to the early services without me. I would join them for our third service at eleven. I awoke soon after their departure and trekked downstairs to indulge in some quiet time with the Lord. An atmosphere of solitude filled our home, and I spent sweet time in His presence. Oh, how I cherish such times!

I eventually journeyed back upstairs for a quick shower. As I entered my bedroom, I turned on the television to create some background noise. I paused momentarily, transfixed by my favorite Food Network chef preparing what looked to be an utterly scrumptious entrée. Captivated, I sat down on the bed and leaned back against the headboard, hoping to glean from her culinary expertise. I'm still unclear about what transpired immediately following.

The details that I am about to share may sound preposterous or far-fetched, but I assure you, they happened just as I describe them—and my life was forever impacted as a result. I hope that yours will be as well!

As I leaned against the headboard, I suddenly lost awareness of my surroundings. I don't remember closing my eyes, and I'm certain that I didn't drift back to sleep. In fact, I was mesmerized by the fact that although I could still distinctly hear the voice of the chef rattling off instructions, her voice was becoming strangely more distant, and eventually it faded into the background. I immediately became conscious of music—the most amazingly beautiful music I had ever heard. Mozart himself would have had difficulty recreating and putting it to score. It was breathtaking and peaceful, filled with exquisite harmonies that enveloped and soothed my soul.

Remarkably, I found myself standing before a line of what I instantly knew were angels, and I passed before them like a general surveying his troops. Oddly enough, my feet never touched the ground, but I moved in suspended motion, gliding and being carried along by some gentle force.

There are countless books and artistic representations depicting angels, but none of them accurately depict those I saw that day. What I saw were not angelic beings with feathered wings and cherub faces, nor were they colossal in size. But I somehow knew instantaneously that they were angels. As I passed before them that day, a heavenly sound reverberated from them—a sound not heard by my ears but one that echoed in the core of my being.

As I moved down the ranks, I noticed that the skin color of all the angels was white. I stopped before the last angel. This one was different from the rest. His skin color was black, and he held a higher place of authority than the others. As I paused before him, the music

stopped, and he began to emit the most beautiful sound of all. No sound on earth could compare to the melodies and harmonies I heard that day.

I was flooded with feelings of warmth and acceptance as this angel sang. At one point he lifted his hand and with one smooth stroke went from my mouth to my heart, where he paused. Suddenly my body was swept from a vertical to a horizontal position; I was now levitating, prone. I felt no fear or apprehension nor any desire to leave that place.

In 2002 my friend Leslie's mother had died of ovarian cancer. In the days leading up to her passing, she had appeared fearful and apprehensive about her impending death. Because Leslie was certain of her mother's salvation, she had approached the hospice nurse and inquired about this seeming lack of peace. The hospice nurse had replied, "Oh, that's understandable; she's just nervous about being the new kid on the playground."

I used to have my own fears about being the "new kid on the playground." Although I knew that I was saved by grace and was confident that I would be going to heaven, it wasn't fear of death that shook me but fear of the unknown. In addition, I am the mother of seven children, and while I look forward to being absent from the body and present with the Lord, I have always been concerned about leaving my children behind after my death. But things changed for me that day.

As I lay in that prone position, I thought, *This must be what death feels like. My husband is going to come home from church and find my body lying lifeless on the bed, and everything is going to be okay.* All fear was gone. There was no "new kid on the playground" kind of feeling at all. I knew that my children would be just fine, and *nothing in me* wanted to leave this extraordinary place.

As I lay prostrate, someone approached me from behind. I knew instantaneously that it was God. I can't tell you how I knew it, but I

did. Suddenly I was enveloped with what seemed to be wings; they completely covered me from the back of my head to my waist. I was hidden, shielded, and protected. I felt a divine sense of safety and security, the very things I'd struggled to find all my life. My feelings of insecurity and fear were swallowed up in His presence that day. I was safe and securely hidden in Him.

I felt as though a blanket of peace had been thrown over me. I was overcome not just with the most incredible sense of peace but also with a depth of love that I had never encountered before. It was an indescribable love, the magnitude of which no love in this world could compare.

As I lay enraptured, I had a sense of being pulled into the center of whatever had enveloped me. I didn't speak my concerns out loud but simply thought, *What's happening?* Immediately I received the answer. It wasn't an audible reply. The communication that took place that day was all done through my thoughts; I would think something and immediately receive the answer. "You are hidden with Christ in God, Rhea" (see Col. 3:3), came the reply. Yes! I was familiar with that scripture verse, but now I was experiencing it at a level that I had never dreamed possible. It was clear that I was hidden in the depths of God. Safe in His presence. Saturated by His love. Immersed in His peace. Captivated by His very being. I never wanted it to end!

I had absolutely no concept of time as I lay there. In fact, it seemed as if time didn't exist. But suddenly, without notice, I felt what I knew was my spirit slipping away from this place of peace. *No! No!* I thought. *I don't want to go back.* As I slipped back into regular consciousness, I observed that in the vision, my body was still lying in the prone position, at rest in God's presence. *What is that, Lord? Why is my body still there?* God's reply was that this is the position I am always in—securely hidden with Christ in God. I may be walking

on the earth, but I am in the heavenlies with Him, securely hidden and safely protected by Him. I could now live with a greater sense of freedom because of this newfound understanding. The fact that I was secure in Christ was no longer only head knowledge—the feelings of security I experienced that day were burned deep within me.

I was startled as, with a heavy thud, my spirit reentered my body, now lying flat on the bed. My body shook from the impact, and I knew, as Paul describes in Second Corinthians 5:6, that I was back “at home in the body.” Straightaway I jumped up from my bed and bolted into the bathroom. I sat there with my head in my trembling hands. The memory of the incredible music was already fading. The sense of overwhelming peace and deep contentment was vanishing. The depth of love—the likes of which I had never sensed before—was drastically diminishing.

My first thought was, *Please don't let it fade, Lord.* I wanted desperately to hang on to that feeling. I prayed that it would be etched into my memory. I was undone. All I knew was that I never wanted to forget what had just happened to me, yet the incredible sense of love that I never wanted to forget was already lessening. However, what remained was the ingrained knowledge that I was indeed *hidden* with Christ in God, that I was safe in His presence and that *nothing* could happen to me outside His perfect will for my life. This was a place of safety.

Although at the time I wasn't sure what was happening, I know now that I experienced a heavenly vision. Some people are not comfortable with the term “vision,” but Scripture speaks clearly about the subject. In Joel 2:28 God spoke a promise through the prophet Joel, saying, “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men *shall see visions.*” John experienced a vision on the isle of

Patmos, Ezekiel experienced many visions and Peter describes a vision about the Gentiles that appeared as a great sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners. Paul said that he could boast of his visions; he wrote about a time when he had a vision and didn't know whether he was "in the body or out of the body," but he knew that he was caught up to the third heaven and shown many things (2 Cor. 12:2).

So visions exist. But to say that I was caught off guard for this one would be an understatement. I could believe that God would speak in visions to Peter, Paul, the prophets of old and, of course, to the disciple whom He loved most, but I was totally unprepared when a glimpse of His glory interrupted my everyday life to speak to the depths of my heart.

As I began to seek the Lord regarding the vision I had received, He led me to a study of Psalm 91. This book that you are holding is a compilation of the truth that I discovered while seeking a deeper understanding of that psalm and its relationship to the vision I received that unforgettable Sunday morning—the truth that if we dwell in the shelter of the Most High and abide in His shadow, we will rest utterly secure, free from the fear of man and the attacks of the enemy and flooded with God's promises of peace, safety, security, honor and eternal life.

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked.

Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge—no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent.

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.

Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation. (Psalm 91)

ONE

God's Promise for Us

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

Psalm 91:1

When our children were growing up, my family loved to attend the circus when it was in town. On one of our excursions, our daughter, Brooke, who at three years old had always been fiercely independent and never wanted to be carried, walked just ahead of her dad and me, exploring her new surroundings and thrilled to be enjoying a little freedom.

As we rounded a corner, a clown approached. He greeted Brooke in typical circus-clown fashion. Startled, she spun around and ran back to her daddy as quickly as her little feet would take her, her arms raised high. It was clear that Miss Independent wanted to be picked up. She had confidence in her daddy and knew that he would protect her in her time of need. She knew where to run for safety.

Do we exhibit the same kind of confidence in our heavenly Father? Do we turn to Him in our time of need? Does fear send us running into His arms? Do we trust, as Scripture so clearly tells us, that He will be our “very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1)? Do we know that our life is safely guarded in Him?

We get to choose the place where we are going to dwell. Are we going to live in mediocrity and bitterness, in unforgiveness and anger, in insecurity and feelings of worthlessness? Or will we decide to dwell in the shelter and protection of the Most High God? It's a choice and one that we must be purposeful about making.

The Promise of Psalm 91

Psalm 91, whose rich promises we will examine in this book, is a reassuring picture of God's divine protection. It's a comforting psalm about God being our refuge and our shelter. It highlights the assurance of His protection and the safety that we can find in His presence. Psalm 91 is a promise from God, and as people of God, we can rest in His promises.

The Word of God says that "all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor. 1:20). In other words, God means what He says, and He'll do what He promises. Scripture says that His Word is already "settled in heaven" (Ps. 119:89, NKJV), and therefore we can count on Him to fulfill His Word in our lives. That should give us great comfort. He is a trustworthy God, and He keeps His Word!

We live in a world of broken promises. We don't need to look beyond our own experiences to know that people don't always keep their word and that promises don't always hold much weight. A promise is only as good as the integrity of the one making it. In much of society today, wedding vows are no longer held sacred, election promises go unfulfilled, parents fail to follow through on commitments to their children and the corporate world guarantees promotions or raises that never materialize.

As the parents of seven children, my husband and I learned early on the importance of saying something to our children (either in the form of a promise or a command) only if we intended to follow

through with it. Children learn very quickly whether or not their parents can be counted on to mean what they say. With every promise kept, our children learn that we can be trusted to do what we say we will do, and that kind of faithfulness is important to them. The opposite is true as well—with every promise broken, we teach them to disregard our words and to put little weight on what we say.

Although my husband, Dave, and I endeavored to always mean what we said when dealing with our children, we were not always perfect. Our Father in heaven, however, is perfect 100 percent of the time, and He absolutely, positively can be trusted to mean what He says.

Lamentations 3:23 describes God's faithfulness as "great," Psalm 36:5 exclaims that it "reaches to the heavens" (NIV), Psalm 100:5 promises that it endures "to all generations," and Second Timothy 2:13 says that God can't help but be faithful, even when we are faithless, because He can't deny Himself.

The Old Testament word for "faithfulness" is *emunah*; it means "firmness, security, fidelity, stability and truth." Its origin is in the word *aman*, which means "to support, uphold, be faithful, made firm, established, sure, verified."¹ In other words, God can be trusted; He is established and sure, and He will always be faithful and completely trustworthy. Establishing this truth firmly in our hearts is a prerequisite to understanding and receiving the promises of Psalm 91.

Psalm 91: A Conditional Promise

While it's important that we understand the faithfulness of God and know that He will keep the promises He makes to us in Scripture, it's also important that we realize that Psalm 91 is a chapter-long conditional promise.

You see, we need to distinguish between two types of promises in the Bible: conditional and unconditional. An example of an

unconditional promise is God saying, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5). This promise is not dependent upon us meeting any requirements before it can be fulfilled. It’s God saying, “I give you My Word, and I mean it when I say that I will *never* leave you and *never* forsake you.”

A conditional promise, on the other hand, requires *our* faithfulness, or *emunah*. The Bible is full of these. For example, in Matthew 11:28 Jesus says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” The condition to be met for those who are weary and heavy laden is that we *come* to Jesus. It is a conditional promise.

Psalm 91 is an entire chapter detailing a conditional promise of God. It’s vital that we understand this if we hope to receive the benefits listed in this psalm.

The psalm is full of promises, but in order to appropriate those to our lives, we have an overarching condition to fulfill, and it is specified in the first verse: “He who *dwells in the shelter of the Most High* will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.”

The word “dwell” is a verb meaning “to live, inhabit, dwell, stay, be settled, cause to settle, cause to sit, marry [with a focus on the spouses living together], stay, sit down, at rest.”² We must take careful note—the passage says “he who dwells,” not one who visits once in a while. So often we want to visit the shelter of the Most High—give Him our ten minutes of quiet time or read a word that He spoke to someone else instead of seeking Him with all our heart and requiring Him as a vital necessity.

We want the benefits of salvation, the assurance of heaven and we want to be able to run to that place of protection occasionally, but too often we are content to follow the Lord at a distance, never fully realizing the intimate fellowship that is available to us when we dwell in His presence.

The promises outlined in Psalm 91 are not possessed by all believers but only by those who walk in close fellowship and deep communion with God—those who are intentional about dwelling, abiding and living in the awareness of God's presence.

Dwelling with God—Something to Take Seriously

Dwelling implies a permanency, a residing—a place of habitual fellowship. But do we truly understand what it means to walk in habitual fellowship with God? To have our abode in Him? To linger in His presence, walk in close communion with Him and bask in His glory, fully aware that His presence lives inside us and that we carry that presence wherever we go?

My husband and I dwell in the same house, but what would happen if I greeted him in the morning but then did not communicate or spend any time with him the rest of the day? We would share a dwelling place but be like two ships passing in the night. We would never know true intimacy or the comfort of one another's presence. Sadly, this is the case with many Christians today when it comes to relationship with Christ.

Many of us have made Jesus our Lord and Savior and invited Him to dwell with us, but we live without the awareness of His presence in our lives—always falling short of the depth of intimacy that He longs to share with His people. Many of us have prayed a “fire insurance” prayer—understanding that there is a hell to shun and a heaven to embrace—but we never truly walk in habitual fellowship and sweet communion with God. My son, Tyler, is particularly fond of saying, “We want heaven, but we want to live like hell to get there.” With our lips we declare Jesus Lord, but we don't exemplify evidence of that lordship. When this is the case, we miss out on the benefits promised to believers in Psalm 91.

Jesus Himself said,

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” (Matt. 7:21–23, NIV)

That verse scares me a bit. It scares me to think that we can call Jesus “Lord” and believe with all our heart that He is, yet still not know Him. The people Jesus referred to in this passage prophesied in His name, cast out demons and did many signs and wonders. I’ll bet that they were good religious people who never missed church and truly believed that they were saved and going to heaven! After all, they were calling Him Lord—they obviously believed that He was! It is sad to realize that Jesus used the word “many” when He referred to them, implying that in the day that we stand before Him, it will not be just a few whom He sends away—it will be many.

Those believers who do not dwell in the shelter of the Most High will miss out on the promises of Psalm 91—one of which includes salvation! I don’t want to be one of the “many” He sends away. We must be careful that we are not just going through the motions of Christianity; instead we must seek the Lord with all our heart and endeavor to dwell in a place of intimacy and deep connection with Him. God wants us to *know* Him. He desires a deep and abiding relationship with us—not mere lip service.

Jeremiah has something to say about this:

“Like their bow they have bent their tongues for lies. They are not valiant for the truth on the earth. For they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know Me,” says the Lord. . . . “They

have taught their tongue to speak lies; they weary themselves to commit iniquity. Your dwelling place is in the midst of deceit; through deceit they refuse to know Me," says the Lord. (Jer. 9:3, 5-6, NKJV)

God was telling Jeremiah that he was living in the midst of deceit. He was not referring to Jeremiah himself but to the people surrounding the prophet. God's people were living in falsehood, behind a façade of lies. As a result of this sin, His people didn't truly know Him and therefore went from evil to evil, sin to sin, wearying themselves to commit iniquity. God told Jeremiah that they were no longer valiant for the truth on Earth or passionate for Him.

Are we guilty of that? Are we no longer valiant for the truth because we love our sin more than we love dwelling in His shelter? Do we play religious games and try to make people think that we are more spiritual than we are? None of us has time for that in our lives.

Lip Service

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines lip service as a "verbal expression of agreement or allegiance, *unsupported by real conviction*; hypocritical respect."³ It's so easy for us to express allegiance with our mouth because we know that it's the right thing to do yet lack the true conviction that produces fruit and brings change into our lives.

Jesus once said, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me'" (Mark 7:6, NIV). He was implying that some people simply give Him lip service—they talk a good talk *about* God but never truly *know* Him. According to Jesus, this is hypocritical! If you and I are going to talk the talk, we must make sure that we walk the walk! God notices the difference, and frankly, so does everyone around us.

Not long ago my husband and I purchased a new desk for our home office. The rest of our office furniture was cherry wood, so it only made sense that the desk we purchased should be cherry as well. The day we decided to go furniture shopping was during a particularly hectic time in my life. Truthfully, my workload was so heavy and I was so frenzied that furniture shopping was not high on my list of priorities. Consequently, I was willing to settle for just about anything. I wanted to get a desk and get back home!

As we entered the furniture store, I was a woman on a mission. I quickly made my way to the home-office section and in record time located a desk that I thought was perfect—and, surprisingly, the price was right. *Hallelujah*, I thought, *Let's get this thing paid for so I can get back to work!* My husband, however, wasn't convinced. After a thorough examination, he explained that while the desk I had chosen looked good at first glance, it was merely covered by a wood veneer and not made of genuine cherry wood. It was a cheap imitation of the real thing.

As Christians, we should strive for authenticity in our relationship with Christ. We need to be the real thing, not a cheap imitation or a “spiritual veneer.” Many churches are filled with people who at first glance look great but upon thorough examination are exposed as frauds. My mother used to say, “Rhea, you are the only Bible some people are ever going to read, so be careful in the way you are living.” Are we genuine or imposters? Are we dwelling in the shelter of the Most High or living as imitations of the real thing?

Jesus did not have a lot of tolerance for spiritual frauds; in fact, He had plenty of negative things to say about them. At times He referred to them as “whitewashed tombs” (Matt. 23:27)—people who work really hard to look good on the outside but on the inside are full of death and everything unclean. We need to be intentional about examining our lives daily, tearing down façades, purifying our hearts and

minds before the Lord and refusing to live in falsehood but rather in authentic, wholehearted devotion to Him.

As we saw in Jeremiah 9, God's people were dwelling in the midst of deceit. The word "dwell" there is the same word that God uses in Psalm 91:1—the word that means "to make your abode" or "reside." Is it possible that we could be making our abode in a place of deceit?

We shouldn't be quick to dismiss that possibility until we get a grasp on what the word "deceit" means—it means "fraud" or "a fraudulent man."⁴ God rebuked His people in Jeremiah's day for living in a place of fraudulence—they were fakes and not the real deal (like the desk at the furniture store!). I don't want to be a fraudulent person—I want to be the real deal or nothing at all. I don't want to put on a mask of spirituality and miss out on the power of God's presence. I don't want to choose sin over intimacy with God and lose my passion for God's truth. I don't want to be a fraud—a cheap imitation of the real thing! I want to be valiant for the truth.

It takes a lot of energy to live in the midst of deceit, to maintain an impeccable spiritual exterior while the interior is less than desirable. I know—I lived there for a long time!

God Desires Intimacy with Broken Sinners

But here's the good news: no matter where we are in our walk with the Lord, even if we have made our abode in a place of deceit, God is calling us to a place of intimacy with Him. God knows everything that there is to know about us—the good and the bad. Psalm 139 tells us that. He knows when we sit and when we rise. He knows our thoughts and what motivates them. He knows what we are going to say before we say it. He knows what makes us tick and why we do the things we do, and here is the amazing part—He loves us anyway and wants us to live in His presence!

Romans 8:39 tells us that *nothing* can ever separate us from the love of God—nothing we’ve done, nothing we could ever do and nothing that has ever been done to us. That’s amazing love. That’s a place of rest and security, and the One who knows us so well invites us to come just as we are and dwell with Him in that place of refuge. He wants us to know Him and experience Him fully.

I love my husband dearly. Our relationship is a place of safety for me. I love that I can be myself with him, makeup or no makeup, overweight or thin, wrinkles or no wrinkles, dressed to the nines or in my sweatpants, with a smile on my face or tears in my eyes. I love that when he wakes up next to me each day with my messy hair, morning breath and sleeper dirt in my eyes, the first words he utters to me are about his great love for me. He loves me just as I am—no façade needed.

God wants us to experience that same kind of intimacy and depth of love with Him. We don’t need to appear super spiritual, put on a mask of perfection or try to amaze Him with our spiritual façade. So many of us feel that we need to impress the Lord with our undaunted church attendance and flawless commitment to serving and ministering in the church. We work hard to pretend that we have it all together. But we don’t need to have it all together or be on our best behavior! We have a God who loves us just as we are and never wants us to hesitate to come to Him that way.

Many years ago I was ministering at a conference in California and preaching on the scripture in Luke 5 where the Pharisees, feeling smug in their self-righteousness, were grumbling and questioning Jesus’ conduct because He was meeting with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus, ever aware of His mission to seek and save the lost, responded gently to them, saying, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Luke 5:31, NIV).

As I spoke that day, I drove home the point that the church should be functioning as a hospital—a place where people who are sin sick can safely come and meet with Dr. Jesus and be healed. I stressed that sometimes the church functions instead as a courtroom in which people are judged and that this should not be.

At the end of that service, a young woman named Kayla approached me and told me that she'd had firsthand experience with the church functioning as a hospital. I encouraged her to share her story with me.

Kayla was a recovering heroin addict who had been clean for six months. But in years past heroin had overtaken her life and stolen everything from her. It had stripped her of her dignity, her home, her job, her children, her marriage, her finances and her health. It had left her homeless on the streets of California, and she had felt powerless over it. She had tried everything to get free—treatment centers, drug rehabilitation programs, twelve-step groups—but nothing had worked.

One day as she walked the streets on a heroin high, a passerby shared the gospel with her. She thought, *I've tried everything else—why not try this Jesus?* The following Sunday she wandered into a local church. She waited to enter until after the service began and was purposeful to leave before it ended. She felt that she knew what people would think of her and wanted to avoid their cruel judgments. Strangely enough, she was captivated by what she heard that day and drawn by the irresistible love of Jesus. She returned to that church week after week, each time high as a kite but desperately longing to know this One who seemed to accept her right where she was, in the condition she was in.

As I listened intently to her story, Kayla reached over to take the hand of an elderly lady sitting close by and, drawing her into our

conversation, introduced the woman to me. “Rhea,” she said with feeling, “one Sunday morning I went into that church, and this woman here was waiting for me in the back row where I normally sat. She took me by the hand and led me to her seat in the front row, and I am standing here six months clean of a horrible addiction because this woman understood that the church is a hospital and loved me enough to introduce me to Dr. Jesus!”

We don’t need to clean ourselves up before we come to Jesus. (If that were the case, I would still be trying to clean myself up!) He loves us just the way we are and invites us to come to Him in the condition we are in. We can approach Him boldly, free of spiritual façades, free of masks and clever pretenses, with the knowledge that He knows everything about us and loves us anyway! That’s a breeding ground for intimacy—for dwelling in the shelter of the Most High.

Many of us can pray up a storm, quote lots of Scripture and would never dream of missing church on Sunday morning, but do we truly know what it means to dwell in a place of intimacy with God and live in freedom with Him? Or are we content being frauds—putting on a good exterior and keeping up false fronts? God isn’t impressed with our church attendance or our Scripture memorization. He longs for relationship with us. Jeremiah so gently reminds us that living in a place of deceit keeps us from intimately knowing the lover of our soul—the only One in whom true intimacy and safety can be found.

Intimacy Requires Vulnerability—but It’s Worth It

I once heard someone describe intimacy as into-me-see. I like that, because that’s what intimacy requires you to do—allow someone to “see-into-you”—and that’s not always comfortable or safe. When we are intimate with someone, we risk exposure. “What will they think if they find out who I really am?” “What if I’m not good enough?”

“What if they reject me when they discover how deeply flawed I am?” Yes, intimacy is risky. It requires vulnerability, but when it's truly attained, it is a place of great comfort and safety.

I have a cherished friend named Leslie. We share an intimacy in friendship that many people never obtain with a friend, and I am grateful for that. Having been friends for almost twenty years, we have a lot of history together. Leslie is my dearest friend, most intimate confidante and my faithful partner in ministry. Our families vacation together, celebrate together, walk through pain together and share many happy memories together.

Our friendship is a safe place. Leslie knows all about me—and she loves me anyway. I'm not afraid to be myself around her.

I don't have to impress her (I can't—she knows too much), and she sticks by me even when I disappoint her. She knows my deep, dark secrets, has shared in my joys and walked closely with me through much heartache.

We've cried together and prayed together, and we are masters at shopping together. She's not embarrassed to be seen with me even when I'm wearing raggedy sweatpants and looking ghastly without my makeup.

I can call her at any hour of the day or night, and she will be happy to talk with me. Our friendship is a place of security; I have no doubt that my secrets are safe with her. Our relationship is reciprocal—Leslie shares her life with me in much the same way that I do with her.

We are often asked if we are sisters because we act so much alike, and people tell us all the time that they wish they could have a friendship like ours. We've even had people admit that they are jealous and deeply envious of us! What they don't understand is that we work hard at the intimate friendship we share; we are intentional about it. It's silly for others to be jealous of what we have when they could

have the same thing with someone else—it just requires work. And, of course, risk taking!

To have an intimate relationship with someone requires a willingness to share ourselves, take risks and let down walls so that we can be real with another person. It requires self-disclosure, an investment of energy and emotional susceptibility. Intimacy doesn't just happen. Leslie and I are purposeful about creating a safe atmosphere—one in which we can share and have freedom to be real—and the glue that holds it all together is intimacy.

When we are intimate with someone, we allow that person to know us at a level that is up close and personal. We allow them to see into us, which could lead to rejection but has the potential to bring about the beauty of unconditional acceptance.

Knowing and Being Known

True intimacy is deeper than a physical connection—it takes us to a place of connection and fulfillment found in truly being known. Intimacy requires work. It requires us to be purposeful about staying available and connected and resolute in keeping communication open and vulnerable. You and I were created for intimacy with the One who created us.

As we saw earlier, God knows everything about us and is not turned off by it! The writer of Psalm 139 exclaims, “O LORD, you have searched me and known me!” (139:1). The word “search” means “to dig,” or, my favorite definition, “to excavate,” which carries the connotation of God digging through the garbage of our lives to uncover the treasure that He knows is buried deep within us.⁵ Remember, He created us and put the treasure there in the first place. He knows what is buried beneath our brokenness and hidden behind our sinfulness. He is intimately acquainted with us!

Yet we often try to hide and cover our imperfections from the One who knows us best. Shockingly, things haven't changed much since the Garden of Eden. As you know, when God created man in the garden, He created man to walk with Him in intimacy, but sin entered the picture and separated man from God, and intimacy was lost. Genesis 3:8 tells us that because of their sinfulness, Adam and Eve hid themselves from God. We haven't learned much from their mistake, because, like Adam and Eve, we continue try to hide ourselves from the One in whom nothing is hidden. We fool ourselves that hiding is a better solution than risking exposure and allowing ourselves to be fully known.

When Christ died on the cross for us, He came to repair what had been lost at the fall and to restore relationship between us and God. As a result, we can now come boldly into His presence and find comfort in our time of need (see Heb. 4:16). First Corinthians 1:9 says that we have been called into fellowship with Christ. The word that Paul uses for "fellowship" in this passage is *koinōnia*, which means "intercourse, fellowship, intimacy, communion."⁶ Think about that! God wants us to enjoy the safety of knowing that we are fully known and completely accepted by Him.

God is like my friend, Leslie, is with me; He knows the deepest, darkest things about us and still sticks by our side. We can come to Him boldly—not fearing rejection or condemnation—but in the freedom of being completely and totally known and loved by a covenant-keeping God.

Intimacy, however, is a two-way street. It needs to be reciprocal. God told Jeremiah that he was dwelling in the midst of a fraudulent people, people who, because they insisted on maintaining a lifestyle of lies and falsehood, did not know Him. And the same is true of us; dwelling in a place of deceit keeps us from knowing Him.

God knows us, but do we know Him? I don't mean do we know *about* Him. I know a lot *about* President Barack Obama. I know that he is the forty-fourth president of the United States. He was born in Hawaii, his wife's name is Michelle and he has two beautiful daughters. I even know that his favorite food is broccoli. But I don't *know* Barack Obama. The same can be true of our relationship with God. We can know a lot about Him but never truly know Him. We can follow the Lord and confess His lordship in our lives but never truly dwell with Him intimately.

We can't get to know someone unless we spend time with him or her, getting to know what the person loves, discovering what makes that individual's heart beat, finding out what brings him or her joy. Why do we spend so much time putting up spiritual façades when the Creator of the universe wants us to truly *know* Him? He wants to fellowship with us and take us to a place of deep communion with Him.⁷

Dwelling Requires Action

I want to learn to dwell in God's presence, in His shelter. But living in that place is a choice every day of our lives, every moment of our day. We must be intentional about where we dwell.

Psalms 91 calls us to live in God's presence: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty." But as we saw earlier, "dwell" is a verb, and a verb conveys action. It puts a motionless subject into motion.⁸ That's important, because you and I are the implied subjects of this verse, and if we are going to meet the condition behind the promise of this passage, it requires action on our part, not a passive waiting. We, the subject of the verse, must be put into motion instead of sitting idly and waiting for God to instantaneously zap us!

We must make a *choice* to dwell in the shelter of the Most High—to direct our thoughts toward Him and remain in intimate communion with Him—becoming daily conscious of His presence with us. We must be intentional about living under the protection of His covering.

In her book *Psalm 91*, Peggy Joyce Ruth uses the illustration of an umbrella in a rainstorm to help her readers gain deeper insight into the psalm.⁹ It's a brilliant example, because just as an umbrella affords protection from a rainstorm, so dwelling under the umbrella of God's protection provides us with shelter from the storms of life. It goes without saying that an umbrella is only useful if we choose to remain under its covering. The moment we step out from under its protection, we are exposed to the elements and immediately affected by them.

The same is true of our relationship with God. We have a choice to remain firmly tucked under the shelter of His protection; or we can choose to remove ourselves from it, but we will always feel the effects of stepping out from under cover. Proverbs 22:3 says, "The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty" (NIV). We have to choose to take cover when we see danger.

When we truly understand the safety found in the shelter of the Most High, we will run for cover, taking refuge in His presence, and intentionally guard against anything that entices us to remove ourselves from it. Just as my three-year-old daughter, Brooke, ran to the safety of her father's arms, so we must abandon our independence and run to the Lord, knowing that He will take care of us in our time of need. As we increasingly learn to dwell in God's presence, we will be blessed with the amazing abundance of promises that He has made to us in Psalm 91.