

I asked Jesus into my heart as a child. Then as the years moved on, and I became a teenager, I drifted from God and slowly stopped attending church. My life became busy with school, dating, working, getting married, and having babies. God remained on the backburner for a very long time. And *throughout that time there was a persistently empty part in my heart*, but I wasn't ready to face the reason behind it. I just kept ignoring it.

In 2010 I became an avid reader after discovering that—low and behold—fun books were out in the world! That they were nothing like what we were forced to read in high school. And with that, I decided I wanted to write a book. I told my husband, and he immediately agreed that I should. He didn't give me a strange—*What is she up to now?*—look or ask me to think about it. He actually went out the next day and bought me a laptop to get started. (He's been my biggest encourager all these years.)

From there, I wrote the worst book in the world (for real). And if that wasn't bad enough, I sent it to some people to read (which still makes me cringe). At the time I was aiming to write romance for the general market. The feedback I received was that the book wasn't "spicy" enough. Writing more heat wasn't something I felt comfortable with. And after attending a general market book conference, and discovering what those publishers were looking for, writing lost its appeal to me and I began to step away from it. Looking back, I think it was the Holy Spirit who took that desire away, keeping me from going down a path that wasn't right for me.

God pretty much remained on the backburner until the end of 2013, when out of blue, my husband had a massive heart attack. My world was rocked to its core, and I immediately began crying to God for help. I knew He was with us, and tried to draw strength in that. But in the days that followed, as complications and setbacks arose, confusion and bewilderment settled into my bones. My tearful calls to God continued into the months that followed with my husband's recovery. I kept asking the Lord to fix this. But I didn't feel true, lasting peace. With my sights on the problem, and not solely on Jesus, I actually began feeling the opposite of peace. Panic attacks began striking me hard.

I tried everything I could to ease those panic attacks. Nothing helped. Finally, I began truly seeking the Lord. I began reading the Bible, listening to (and singing horribly along with) contemporary worship music, and reading a daily devotional (shoutout to *Jesus Calling* by Sarah Young). I connected with a wonderful church full of amazing, genuine, welcoming people. The praise and worship part of those church services took on a new meaning for me. In worshiping God through music, there was this sweet deepness I'd never felt before. I soon found the desires of my heart changing.

In pursuing God, my relationship with Him shifted. That empty part of my heart that had plagued me for so long, it began filling. The panic attacks began subsiding, and I began to see the Lord through a new light. Not the fire and brimstone, judgmental God I'd been raised on, but that my God was loving, caring, forgiving. And very personal. And He'd been right there, patiently waiting for me all of those years to return to Him.

Toward the end of the next year, 2014, I was having health issues that resulted in surgery. The night of the surgery, I had complications, and began bleeding out. I was rushed into emergency

surgery. In the chaos of everything, I had TOTAL peace. And I know, without a doubt, that it was from Jesus. That He was there. He saw me through that night, and a long recovery that included yet another surgery.

Not long after, and I can't remember how this came about, but I heard about Francine Rivers' book, *Redeeming Love*. I ordered a copy on Amazon and was like WHOA! Number one, I had no idea Christian fiction existed. Let alone that Christian books could be like *that*. And then Amazon recommended Becky Wade. After devouring just one of her books, I was like THIS is what I want to write! And God returned that desire to write with a vengeance.

As I kept seeking a true relationship with the Lord, He continued filling me with peace and joy that was beyond my understanding (and still is). That empty spot in my heart not only filled, but began brimming and overflowing with fullness, and from that point on I felt like a new person. I was like, "Jesus, let's do this!"

God began moving steadily through my family, and over the next two years, both of my sons, and my husband were baptized. During that time, and for the next two years, I wrote like the dickens, and studied the craft of writing. I also began querying agents. When it was all said and done, I'd received twenty-two rejections (and learned a lot). BUT that *yes* finally came through in God's perfect timing when in 2018, I signed with Bob Hostetler with The Steve Laube Agency. From there, Bob sent my first publisher-ready manuscript out. In the end there was some interest, but it didn't get picked up.

In 2019, I attended an online seminar Becky Wade was giving on survival skills for authors, and there were two things she talked about that really socked me in the gut. The first was to pray before you write. The second was this . . . *The reward of this work is the satisfaction of writing stories for and with Him. Not a contract.* *BOOM*. Up until this point, I had been writing for a contract. That had been my only goal. My perspective and heart changed after that seminar. With this new outlook, I went on to write my next manuscript.

In 2021, with that new manuscript completed, and out making the rounds for consideration with publishers, the Lord began pressing this rom-com featuring a forty-year-old heroine on me. I'd reasoned with the Lord that this wasn't something that was out there in the traditional market for inspirational romances. But y'all, Jesus is persistent. I talked to some friends (who are also huge readers) about it and they were ecstatic, encouraging me wholeheartedly. Still, I was hesitant. And still, God kept nudging me. So I wrote an outline and the first few chapters. It felt amazing! It was like my writer-voice had been hiding inside me all those years, just waiting for this moment. And yet, I was still hesitant to go any further with the project.

But God kept pressing me about writing this book in the tender way He's known to speak to me. So I polished the opening chapters and submitted them for a contest. I had no ambitions about the entry winning (which it didn't). I just wanted anonymous feedback on the unspoken rule I was attempting to break.

During that time, one of the publishers my twentysomething romance had been sent to, was taking my manuscript to their pub board for approval. I was on cloud nine! After eleven years of writing, I'd never made it this far.

The next week, I attended a virtual conference, and had scored a ten-minute editor appointment with Raela Schoenherr who at the time was the Acquisitions Editor for Bethany House Publishers. I didn't pitch her anything since she already had my last twentysomething romance. As a courtesy, I let her know that manuscript was going to the pub board with another publisher. For those ten minutes we chatted, and I picked her brain. For this editor appointment, I was able to submit a one-sheet for her to review. A one-sheet is basically a flyer on the book you're pitching. Something that's supposed to catch their attention. Since I didn't have anything to pitch for the appointment, I created a flyer for the fortysomething rom-com. It felt kind of crazy to send it, but I figured the worst that could happen would be that she'd get a laugh out of it.

Not long after that meeting, Raela reached out to me about the fortysomething romance. It turned out that story I had entered in that contest had made it to the finals, and she was one of the final judges. The one-sheet I'd submitted for our appointment reminded her of those chapters she'd read for the contest. She was interested in taking my partial manuscript to her pub board for approval. I was floored. Floored!

With the possibility of a contract heading my way, I started praying those verses from the Old Testament where Moses was pleading with God not to send him and the Israelites up into the land unless God was going with them. And that was my plea to God. Because I knew I couldn't do it without Him. No way, no how. Between my day job, family, my parents getting older and having health issues. I just knew I couldn't add to my plate if God wasn't going to carry that plate for me.

That other publisher approved my twentysomething romance, and was offering me a multi-book contract. *Say what?* Then Bethany House approved my fortysomething partial manuscript. To say I was shocked would be a gross understatement. To say my agent was shocked would also be a gross understatement. But when the shock began to slightly wear off, I realized I had a HUGE decision to make.

- 1) Take a multi-book deal with a truly fabulous publishing house. The first book, and part of the second book had already been written.

OR

- 2) Take a two-book deal based on a partial manuscript with fortysomething characters. It was a risk based on the concept, and in that it wasn't written yet.

I want to press pause right here. Do you see what happened? **These are the two projects I'd written for and with God. Projects I prayed steadily over. When my goal shifted to writing for and with God, and not writing for a contract, this was the result.**

Okay. Back to the story. I spent a lot of time on my knees praying earnestly for God's guidance in this decision. Friends and family were praying too. As you can guess, I felt God leading me to the offer from Bethany House. Over the next year I prayed over, and wrote, what would become my debut novel, *Julia Monroe Begins Again*. And during that year, the Lord was faithful, showing up every time I sat down to write.

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I praise Him in the good times, and the bad. This broken world has flung and will continue to fling trials my way, but I know that if I keep my eyes fixed on the Lord, that the waves won't overcome me.

He is faithful. Always.