



Spoken For

embracing who you are and whose you are

Robin Jones Gunn
and
Alyssa Joy Bethke

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From Robin:

*To all my nieces: Amanda, Ashley, Alyssa, Katherine,
Hannah, Karen, Susi, Gabi, and Sami.*

*May you always remember who you are
and whose you are.*

*You are deeply loved by the One who created you,
more than you will ever know.*



From Alyssa:

*To Jeff: Thank you for showing me
how God is the Relentless Lover
through your unending and gracious love.*

*To my mentors: Mom, Amy, Dani, Robin, Jill, and Jeri.
Thank you for teaching and showing me that we are Spoken For
and that his love is truly the greatest of all.*

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One

An Epic Love Story—
Yours

One bright April morning Alyssa and I (Robin) were busy in my kitchen preparing food for a youth event at church. All the windows were open. A gentle breeze cooled us. The television was on in the background, but we weren't paying much attention. I reached for the remote to turn it off but accidentally changed the channel.

"Oh, wait," Alyssa said. "Leave it there. I love this part."

I had happened upon an oldie-but-goodie chick flick at just the right moment. It was one of my favorites too. Alyssa and I stopped what we were doing. We stood together in a sweet silence and watched as the fair maiden ran into the arms of her hero. We sighed and looked at each other. Alyssa had tears in her eyes. So did I. We pointed at each other and laughed.

"Why are we crying?" I asked. "I'm sure we've both seen this a dozen times."

"I know," Alyssa said wistfully. "But it's such a great love story. And love stories get me every time."

It's true, isn't it? Love stories draw us in. Honestly, who doesn't love a good love story? The pursuit. The suspense. The drama. The mystery. We cry, we laugh, we cheer—all for love. We are captivated by our favorite movies, television shows, and books when the romantic elements capture our imaginations and enliven our hopes.

Even if you don't see yourself as a girlie girl and didn't have a favorite Disney princess when you were growing up, you know in your core that you want to be loved like the heroines in all the best films and stories. You want to see love conquer all.

The desire to be loved, cherished, and adored never goes away. All of us long to believe someone is out there who wants us. Someone who will come for us. Someone who will take the role of the hero in our lives and love us, deeply love us, not for what we do or how we look but simply for who we are.

What if you could know that you *are* loved that intensely? You *are* sought after. You *are* the bride-to-be in a love story that's unfolding in your life right this minute. You are spoken for.

This love story began once upon a time long ago before you were even born. Almighty God, the Creator of the galaxies, thought of *you*. He carefully fashioned *you*—your voice, your fingers, your mind, even every one of your eyelashes. He carefully and deliberately crafted you. For all time there only has been and only will be one of you.

He saw all your days before you took your first breath. He knows all your thoughts before you speak them. He knows everything about you. From the very beginning you were known, and you were wanted. He is pursuing you like a tenacious bridegroom with a perfect proposal. He has set his affections on you. Why? Because he loves you, and he will never stop loving you. You are his first love, and he wants you back.

How do you respond to such unwavering, unending, unstoppable love?

In this book we will unwrap the ancient truths from God's Word about what it means to be loved, to be sought after, to be spoken for. You will see how the Bible is a love letter written to us.

Through that love letter God makes it clear that he desires to be with us forever. Alyssa and I will share details from forever-love stories and show how our love for God grew as he pursued us.

Our goal is simple. We want you to see what happens when you respond to the invitation of the true Bridegroom and step into the center of an epic love story—yours.



Two

You Are Wanted

Embedded in our souls is a quiet wish, a secret hope we carry with us always.

We want to feel wanted.

Yet we struggle to fit in and to be included. It's more common to experience rejection than acceptance. We're more familiar with the bitter sting of being left out than with the delight of being sought out. All of us know what it's like to be overlooked and unwanted.

When was the last time you felt that way?

Was it last week when a group of friends decided to get together and none of them thought to include you? Or was it last month when you poured your heart into a guy who expressed interest in you, only to find out that he didn't share any of your romantic feelings?

Perhaps the ache of feeling unwanted hit hardest when you were a child. You overheard your parents fighting and came to the conclusion that your presence on planet Earth was an inconvenience to them.

Or maybe more recently you were caught off guard when you applied for the ideal job. You waited days for the call. After convincing yourself you would be hired, you were told in an impersonal way that the position had been filled. You were not wanted.

Yes, we all know the wrenching pain that comes from experiencing rejection. Our hopes are crushed, our feelings ignored, our hearts broken. What do we do? We pull back. We draw inward and give way to doubt and distrust. We brace ourselves against

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further hurt, and with a straight face we say that we don't care. It doesn't matter. No one can hurt us.

And yet...

The longing to be wanted continues to be the cry of our hearts. We dream of being sought out, included, welcomed, and warmly embraced. But living as we do in the rubble of a fallen world, rejection, not acceptance, seems most often to accompany us on our life journey.

So why do we keep hoping? Why does the secret wish to be wanted never go away? The hope lingers over us like a lullaby because we were created to experience love and to give love. We were made to belong, to be accepted, to be included. We were created to be in community with God and with others. He has reached out to us so that we might know *who* we are and *whose* we are.

You see, you were bought at a great price. You belong to the One who made you. You are spoken for. Almighty God, your heavenly Father, will never leave you, never reject you, and never say "Go away." He moved heaven and earth to make known to you this steadfast truth: you *are* wanted.

Robin

The worst rejection I ever experienced came when I was twenty-one.

I was engaged to a guy I'd met in college. I thought we had done everything right. We were friends first, dated in group set-

tings at the Christian college we attended, and waited until after he graduated before we became engaged.

Then one February afternoon he looked me in the eye and spoke words that broke my heart: “I can’t marry you. I don’t love you. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

My wedding dress was hanging in the closet. The invitations had been selected. In a single moment I went from believing I was loved and wanted to being told I was not wanted. I was very much unloved.

He went on to reveal big pieces of his life that he had kept hidden from me. I was not his one and only. I was, in his opinion, absurdly romantic to have written letters to my future husband declaring my loyalty to him and praying for his faithfulness to me. My unrealistic expectations, he said, had caused our relationship to fail.

I will never forget how that rejection felt. I was so confused.

For days I tried to make sense of it. I struggled to separate the truth from the lies. Acidic thoughts kept me awake at night. *The problem is me. It is. That’s why he ended our engagement. I’m too idealistic, like he said. I put too much pressure on him when I gave him the letters I’d written to my future husband. If I hadn’t romanticized our relationship, we’d still be together.*

A destructive cycle of thinking kicked in. I thought that if I worked hard to make improvements in my personality, my body shape, my looks, and especially my beliefs, then he would want me again. I would be accepted by him, and we could be together.

He would take me back. He would love me again if only I would change. I *had* to change.

Yet it soon became clear that none of my efforts would change his heart. He had made his final decision, and I was out of his life for good.

Not to mention that none of the changes I might attempt would be lasting, because they wouldn't be true to who I was and what I believed. Temporary adjustments to please him wouldn't alter who I was at the core. Eventually my true personality, opinions, and values would come through.

The raw and horrible truth was that I was unwanted. Cast aside. Unloved.

The only thing—and I do mean the only thing—that kept my heart above water in the wake of that life-altering rejection was that I knew, really truly knew, Someone wanted me. Someone who took me in just the way I was. Someone who had already invited me to be his bride. My relationship with him was sealed for eternity. He was my way out of the hurt. He was the One who spoke truth to me. He was the One who showed me true love.

That Bridegroom was Jesus. He loved me. He wanted me. Always.

My journey with Christ began when I was twelve years old and went to summer church camp. My main objective during that week was to be included in the popular group. I wanted to

share the inside jokes and be invited to hang out at the camp pool with my new best friends. I dearly wanted to be wanted.

My efforts met with success, and by the last night I was sitting in the front row with the most popular kids at camp. I even knew the clever hand motions the group had made up to go along with the songs. It felt great being on the inside.

Acquiring that favored position had taken a lot of work, but it came with a fleeting reward. In the morning when camp ended, all of us would go our separate ways. I remember feeling sad that our gang was going to be dismantled.

Then the speaker said something that grabbed my attention: “God doesn’t have any grandchildren. Just because your parents are Christians, that doesn’t automatically make you a Christian.”

What got to me was the way the speaker explained that God doesn’t show us favor because we’re part of an insiders’ group. He doesn’t give us special consideration because of our families. He invites us to come to him as individuals. And that night I did. I responded with my whole heart to receive Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord.

If anyone would have asked me prior to that last night at camp if I was a Christian, I would have said yes. I’d grown up going to church, so of course I was a Christian. It seemed to me the same as if someone had asked me if I were an American after having lived in the United States my whole life.

But I had never personally responded to the invitation to enter

God's forever family. My prayer that night was simple. I knew that I could never be good enough through my own efforts to be right and pure before God. I needed to receive the gift of Christ's sacrifice. I needed to ask God to forgive all my sins.

My camp counselor prayed with me that night, and I calmly surrendered my life to Christ. As soon as I looked up at her, big, shoshy tears streamed down my face. I was overwhelmed to realize that God wanted me. He loved me. He wanted me to be in a close relationship with him. He promised he would never leave me. He would never give up on me. He accepted me into his kingdom. I felt so loved. So wanted.

The first thing I did after summer camp was start to read my Bible. I remember one day reading somewhere in the middle of 1 John and feeling as if I was reading a love letter. That's when I made the heart-pounding discovery that the Bible is a love story, an epic love story, in which every page is laced with evidence of God's unending love for us.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us!

1John 3:1

For years after that night, I read God's Word and memorized his promises and eternal truths. Some days during my time alone with God, I felt as if I were on a treasure hunt, searching for the nuggets of truth that applied to what I was going through at the time.

That's how the Bible touched my heart right after my fiancé ended our engagement. I remember opening my Bible and my heart fully to the Lord. I felt so raw and vulnerable. I was looking for comfort, and I found it. Throughout God's beautiful love letter, I discovered reassuring evidence of his unfailing love. I started a list of verses and titled it "What God Says About You."

Whenever I felt discouraged about what my ex-fiancé or others said about me, I went to the list of what God said about me and found my heart filling up with life-giving hope. I even found a verse, John 3:29, in which John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the "bridegroom" and those who followed him as his "bride." His Word healed me. I knew that no matter what happened with any other relationship, Jesus would always want me.

A few years later I met the man who is now my husband. My heart was anchored, and I was much more prepared for marriage because I understood more fully what it meant for Jesus to be my First Love. My hopes were realistic because they were founded in his truth.

I also discovered that I *was* realistic to hope for fidelity and to grow in a relationship that was flooded with the light of God's truth and forgiveness. Even though my letters to my future husband had been given away and never returned, the man I did marry was the answer to the prayers I had written from my hopelessly romantic heart when I was a teenager.

I encourage you to take some time alone with God to go through the list of "What God Says About You" at the end of

this chapter. Look up the verses, and mark your favorite ones in your Bible. Soak up the truth of how deeply God loves you and how much he wants you. Believe me when I say that the anchor of God's truth will keep you steady through every stormy relationship.

So I want you to realize that the LORD your God is God. He is the faithful God. He keeps his covenant for all time to come. He keeps it with those who love him and obey his commands. He shows them his love.

—Deuteronomy 7:9, NIV

Alyssa

Just like Robin, I discovered how much God loves me when I was a teenager. I also discovered how painful it can be when you realize you are not wanted.

My freshman year in high school was a season of big changes. I'd graduated junior high, surrendered my life to Jesus, started high school, formed new friendships, and experienced my first real love. (Big changes, people, big changes!)

Now, I had had crushes in the past. Oh boy, did I have crushes! But *this*, this was the real deal. This boy was different. He and I would talk forever. E-mailed each other. Served with each other in our youth group. He was the first boy I knew who really loved Jesus. He was the first boy who made me want to love Jesus

and seek him more. This guy pointed me to God, and I was in love.

Yes, I was in love with Jesus but also in love with this guy. I spent hours thinking about him and our possible future together. My best friend and I would stay up until the wee hours talking about the boys we liked. We would analyze every conversation and every thought and anxiously wait for those guys to pursue us. Oh, how desperately I wanted to be with this guy. How much I wanted him to want me too and to choose me.

However, as the months wore on, instead of my dream coming true, he and I were growing further and further apart. He gave no indication he liked me. He never pursued me and never called to hang out, as I had so hoped. No, he didn't want me. I wasn't his choice. He was a great guy and definitely a friend, but he didn't reciprocate my feelings.

I can't tell you how many nights I cried myself to sleep. How many prayers I prayed. My heart was broken.

Until one night I finally gave up. I gave it all to the Lord—my heart, my dreams, my longings, and this guy. I was done. I couldn't bear the rejection anymore. I asked God to take over and mend my heart. To show me his unfathomable love and how *he* wants me. I didn't heal overnight. The feelings didn't go away immediately, and the loneliness and hurt still stung. But slowly the Lord revealed himself to me. Slowly the Lord showed me how deeply he loved and cherished me, how he was ultimately the Love of my life. And slowly the Lord helped me to move on. Yes, it took years.

But the Lord was faithful to walk through those years with me—years of constant surrender and trusting his best for my life.

The summer before my freshman year I had started my relationship with Jesus. No big moment happened. No altar call occurred. Instead, I was bored one day and decided to read a book my mom had bought me, one in the Christy Miller Series by Robin Jones Gunn. I hadn't met Robin yet, so to me it was just a teen romance, but I later learned it was the first novel Robin had written for teen girls.

On those pages I found a friend, Christy—a fifteen-year-old girl who comes to know Jesus. Not just know about Jesus or all the facts about Jesus, but actually came to know *him*.

This fictional character's life changed after that decision. She fell in love with God, the One who had wanted her so much that he sent his Son to die on the cross for her sins.

Yes, this beautiful Savior transformed Christy's life. Everything changed for her.

I desperately wanted to know, adore, and live for Jesus like Christy did. Through her example I was ushered into a forever relationship with God.

But it wasn't until my freshman year, when I walked through my season of love, disappointment, loneliness, and hurt, that I truly understood Jesus's love for me. Whether I was wanted by a boy or not, Jesus wanted me. *Jesus*. He loves me. He likes me! He wants to be with me, and no sin, no barrier of time or space, would stop him from winning my heart.

It's the same with you.

He wants you.

No matter if you're single, dating, married, or ninety-nine years old, Jesus wants you. He is after your heart. I don't think I would have understood that beautiful truth as deeply if I hadn't walked through my season of rejection.

Robin and I aren't the only ones who know the sting of rejection. Throughout life we'll experience all kinds of loss and hurt. The opinions and actions of others do not define us. We are known and wanted by the Lord himself. He never changes, never turns on us, never gives up on us.

All the fiery pain from rejection by other people can be put into perspective when you know that you are wanted by the Bridegroom. He made the stars. He tells the sun when to rise each morning. His hand holds back the ocean. His faithfulness endures for a thousand generations. He made you. He wants you. He loves you.

The lies, the memories of past hurts, the ache of rejections—those things burrow deep in our hearts, and most of us spend a lot of time digging those hurtful experiences back up. Whatever your story, whatever pain and hurt you have experienced, God knows. Not only does he know, but he has entered into your story. He has made a way for you to know your Savior, your Healer, your King. He wants to heal you, to make you like his Beloved Son, and to be with you forever. No, this life won't be pain free. But Jesus promises to walk with us through the pain. He never leaves. Ever. He is our Rock.

We will never fully understand why God allows us to go through pain and trials, but one reason is to draw us to him. When we walk through a trial, if we turn to him as our refuge and comfort, regardless of how messy and doubtful we may be, he draws us close into his embrace. He welcomes us in. He showers us with his love.

This is an epic love story that you are part of. You are wanted. Draw in that eternal truth: You. Wanted. Forever.

Come walk with us as we see how God woos each of us into a beautiful love story that will change our lives.

So the LORD must wait for you to come to him
so he can show you his love and compassion.

For the LORD is a faithful God.

—Isaiah 30:18, NLT

What Do You Think?

1. Describe a time when you were wanted and what that felt like.
2. Think about a time you were left out or rejected. How did you handle the hurt?
3. How do you think God feels as he waits for us to come to him?

What God Says About You

- ◆ You were made in my image (Genesis 1:27).
- ◆ You are my treasured possession, my peculiar treasure (Exodus 19:5, NIV, KJV).
- ◆ If you seek me with your whole heart, you will find me (Deuteronomy 4:29).
- ◆ When you are brokenhearted, I am close to you (Psalm 34:18).
- ◆ Delight in me, and I will give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4).
- ◆ I know everything about you (Psalm 139:1).
- ◆ I know when you sit down and when you stand up (Psalm 139:2).
- ◆ I am familiar with all your ways (Psalm 139:3).
- ◆ I knit you together when you were in your mother's womb (Psalm 139:13).
- ◆ You are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14).
- ◆ All your days were written in my book before there was one of them (Psalm 139:16).

- ◆ My thoughts toward you are as countless as the grains of sand on the seashore (Psalm 139:17–18).
- ◆ As a shepherd carries a lamb, I have carried you (Isaiah 40:11).
- ◆ I knew you before you were conceived (Jeremiah 1:5).
- ◆ My plans for your future are for good, to give you hope (Jeremiah 29:11).
- ◆ I have loved you with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3).
- ◆ I will never stop being good to you (Jeremiah 32:40).
- ◆ I will take pleasure in doing good things for you and will do those things with all my heart and soul (Jeremiah 32:41).
- ◆ I want to show you great and marvelous things (Jeremiah 33:3).
- ◆ I rejoice over you with singing (Zephaniah 3:17).
- ◆ I am your provider. I will meet all your needs (Matthew 6:31–33).
- ◆ I know how to give good gifts to my children (Matthew 7:11).
- ◆ I gave you the right to become my child when you received my Son, Jesus, and believed in his name (John 1:12).

- ◆ I am the Bridegroom and you are my bride (John 3:29).
- ◆ I have prepared a place for you. I will come back for you and take you to myself so that we can be together forever (John 14:3).
- ◆ I love you even as I have loved my only Son (John 17:23).
- ◆ I revealed my love for you through Jesus (John 17:26).
- ◆ I determined the exact time of your birth and where you would live (Acts 17:26).
- ◆ In me you live and move and have your being (Acts 17:28).
- ◆ I am for you and not against you (Romans 8:31).
- ◆ I will never allow anything to separate you from my love for you (Romans 8:35–39).
- ◆ I gave my Son so that you and I could be reconciled (2 Corinthians 5:19).
- ◆ I am your peace (Ephesians 2:14).
- ◆ I am able to do more than you could possibly imagine (Ephesians 3:20).
- ◆ I am at work in you, giving you the desire and the power to fulfill my good purpose for you (Philippians 2:13).

- ◆ I did not give you a spirit of fear but of power, love, and self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:7).
- ◆ Every good gift you receive comes from my hand (James 1:17).
- ◆ I desire to lavish my love upon you because you are my child and I am your Father (1 John 3:1).
- ◆ My love for you is not based on your love for me (1 John 4:10).
- ◆ I gave the ultimate expression of my love for you through Jesus (1 John 4:10).
- ◆ I am the complete expression of love (1 John 4:16).
- ◆ I will dwell with you in heaven. You will be mine, and I will be your God (Revelation 21:3).
- ◆ I will one day wipe away every tear from your eyes, and there will be no more crying or pain or sorrow (Revelation 21:4).
- ◆ I have written your name in my book (Revelation 21:27).
- ◆ I invite you to come (Revelation 22:17).





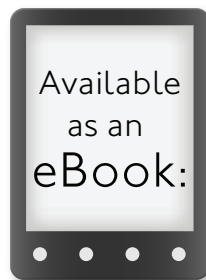
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