

MELISSA D'ARABIAN

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

TASTING GRACE

DISCOVERING THE POWER OF FOOD
TO CONNECT US TO GOD,
ONE ANOTHER, AND OURSELVES

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MELISSA
D'ARABIAN

TASTING
GRACE

HOW FOOD INVITES US
into DEEPER CONNECTION
with GOD, ONE ANOTHER,
and OURSELVES



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*For Philippe, Océane, Margaux,
Charlotte, and Valentine.
You make it all matter.*

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Introduction

How Is God Reaching Us Through Food?

Food, and our relationship to food, is central to modern-day life. As a society, we are infatuated with recipes and food photos; chefs are celebrities; today's TV programming is filled with shows about food, competitions, guides, and exposés—and not just on niche websites or cable networks, but everywhere we look, including prime-time mainstream network television. Bookstores are filled not only with cookbooks, which have become more visual escapes than actual instruction manuals, but with entire tomes about food, life in food, life in food media, behind-the-scenes glimpses into food careers, and culinary travel guides. When we aren't talking about food directly—debating veganism, the value of organic food, how much or little it should be cooked, and where it can be sourced—we focus on the management of food in our lives: how to lose weight as well as how often, how much, and what kinds of food to eat or avoid and in what combinations for optimum health. Health and weight issues aside, we're so obsessed with food that it is styled up and made impossibly pretty for the masses, creating a culture of food elitism or, more crassly, food porn. Food is at the very core of our daily lives.

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Food isn't just a big part of modern society; it's central throughout history, particularly in many key biblical moments. From the beginning, which we see in Genesis, God designed a food system—his process for feeding us—as part of creation. Food was central to man's first obedience and man's first disobedience (anyone else shout “Don't touch that apple, Adam!” when you read Genesis?). In Exodus, God delivered bread, or manna, to the Israelites. Isaiah is where we first read about the promise that, at the end of time, the Lord will host his people at a lavish banquet (the “messianic banquet”). And food is all over the New Testament! Jesus ate and drank throughout his ministry (noted more in Luke than in any of the other Gospels), and he used meals to feed the hungry, welcome the marginalized, and offer his body as the Bread of Life. Meals were a cornerstone of the early church. In fact, they *were* the early church services. Believers daily worshipped and broke bread together. These are just a few examples that make one thing clear: *food was not an afterthought for God.*

God's Invitations for Us

As Christians, we commonly think of meals in terms of their ability to bring together a community, and that is right and good. But looking at food through the lens of the Bible tells us a meal does so much more. Food invites us into God's creation, is a cornerstone of hospitality, guides us into compassion, reminds us to slow down, is a source of delight and connection, is an opportunity to lean into our dependence on God, and motivates us to accept ourselves and the oneness of humankind or creature-kind. Food fuels far more than our bodies; it drives ministry, marks celebrations, and connects us to our true selves, to one another, and to God himself.

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Turns out, God has a lot to say through food, and it's not all in line with what society is saying about food. Before I wrote this book—in fact, what led me to writing it!—I prayed, read, cooked, studied Scripture, and listened. And I remembered experiences from across my life that shaped who I am as a food professional, a mom, a wife, and a woman. I came to respect the role food has in our lives in general and in mine in particular, a role far bigger than I had expected. When I took the time to consider the powerful place food has had in my life, I saw how intertwined food and God were, and patterns—*lessons* I even called them—emerged.

I have a somewhat complicated history with food. Most people know me from Food Network's reality show *The Next Food Network Star* (which I won in its fifth season) or from my subsequent cooking show *Ten Dollar Dinners*. But what most people don't know is that I grew up not always having enough, which shaped my views on food when I was a child. Then, as a woman, I took in the many mixed messages of this world and found myself stuck in a no-man's-land of wanting to eat healthy but somehow slipping into eating to get thinner rather than to make my body its best temple for God. There is a fine line between eating healthy and exercising in worship of God *and* eating healthy and exercising because I want to be pretty or admired by the world. The two approaches look very similar. But they are different in a crucial way: one is worshipping the Creator, and the other is worshipping the world he created. And that is the tension we are living with: what society says about food isn't necessarily what God wants for us with food, and if we aren't paying attention, we can fall into the world's ways.

As I progressed in my quest to understand how God is using food in my life, hoping that some of my experience would speak to you too,

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I softened. God's meals weren't lessons of admonition; they were welcoming me to be closer to him. They were invitations simply waiting to be opened.

God used food to invite me into his love.

This book is the story of those invitations.

And God is inviting you into the same love—and using food as a way to connect with you.

Consider Me a Trench Buddy

We're all busy. I get it. I'm a working mom who always has more items on my to-do list than hours in the day. I've been there when the schedule is so packed that the easiest thing is to grab a quick meal or snack and head off to the next thing without ever giving my food choice or God's invitation a thought. Been there?

That's why I wrote this book: to help us all hear God's invitation a little more clearly, to sift through the food-frenzied culture, and to listen to how God yearns for us to use and appreciate what he has created for us. At the end of each chapter, in a section called "RSVP to the Invitation," I've shared some of the activities that helped me find my way to God's invitations. I hope you find them as helpful as I did.

Some people know me as a Food Network "star" or from my weekly Associated Press "Healthy Plate" column. However, I'm not in the food business or even the TV business. I'm in the business of being in the trenches with other women, sharing our experiences to make our lives a little bit easier and a lot more meaningful. I'm a trench buddy, because we all want someone to understand what it means to try to feed her family and create a life of significance, someone who won't pile on a heap of guilt for not creating gourmet meals and designing amazing,

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magazine-cover-worthy food presentations. Over the ten years I have been on television, I have become known for my family and faith just as much as for my recipes and kitchen tips. You and I are in this together—on a quest not just for healthy and inexpensive ways to feed ourselves and our families, but also to navigate the hype and find God’s truth for us in every meal, snack, drink, and grocery aisle.

My first two books—*Ten Dollar Dinners* and *Supermarket Healthy*—were, on the surface, a budget cookbook and a healthy cookbook. But to me they were both spiritual books, rooted in gratitude and stewardship. *Ten Dollar Dinners* isn’t about getting the cheapest thing you can find in the store, but it celebrates God’s seasonality and shares smart strategies for getting the most for our hard-earned money. *Supermarket Healthy* isn’t a diet book; it reminds us that food nourishes our families, so let’s feed them mindfully. I wrote both these books with my Bible open on my desk, and I found inspiration and direction in God’s Word. Both of these books share my Christian worldview with a secular world.

I felt a strong calling to write my first Christian book a few years ago. I’d been leading Bible studies and speaking to and teaching Christian audiences for several years. But before I wrote an actual book, I longed for more formal study with professors and thought leaders. I felt that my reach with television was broader than my base and my branches were wider than my roots were long. I began to study the Bible more deeply, in earnest, beyond my daily morning devotionals. In 2015, I completed a one-year certificate in theology and ministry program through Princeton Theological Seminary. If there is anything I learned from that year of deep study, it’s how much more I have to learn! I continue to be a daily student of God’s Word, wrestling and digesting it to keep my life meaningful, significant, and on God’s path for me. I also

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learned that I am an academic by nature, so I could easily keep studying as a stalling tactic instead of writing the book God had placed in my heart! Which brings us to the book you're now holding. *Tasting Grace* will not be perfect, and if there are errors in the interpretation of God's Word on food, then those are mine alone. But this book has been dancing in my head in various forms for several years, and I'm relieved finally to have it written. I've lived every letter and every space in it. And now I offer it to you.

If you are reading this, you may be a lot like me—a Christian woman grappling with one of life's many thought-provoking seasons: new job or school, midlife, postbaby, empty nest, kids getting married. But I also hope if you aren't, you feel welcome anyway. Wherever we are in life, whatever our faith may be, I know we are connected simply by the fact that we share the same world and we all eat. We all know the edgy feeling of hunger pangs, some more acutely than others, and we all know the nourishing feeling of being well fed by food and by company.

I also imagine that you might see a bit of yourself in my struggles and questions. Struggles such as figuring out what kind of food is honoring your body—and where Diet Coke fits into the puzzle. Questions such as wondering how to feed your family while managing a budget. My hope is that we can connect over what we have in common, overcome and celebrate what we don't, and honor each other on our various paths. My hope is that we can start a deeper conversation about food and its power to bring us together, draw out the best in us, and hear God's voice in the midst of it all.

All of us crave trench buddies so we can share our deepest fears and hopes about ourselves and our families. Feeling inadequate and unworthy when it comes to our individual food stories is at the top of that list

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for many people, women perhaps even more than men. While *Tasting Grace* offers a lot of personal stories and honesty about my struggles with food, it is more than a food memoir. It's a hand reaching out from the trenches, opening the conversation that I think we should be having, and sharing the journey to consider these core questions:

How does my eating please God? Am I willing to trust his food vision for me?

I want to let go of what the world is saying about food and lean into God's creation. I invite you to join me.

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Hungering for What Truly Satisfies

An Invitation into Compassion

Jesus used food to bring people together and to feed both bodies and souls.

Food saved me. This is a bold statement for a Christian girl like me. But when you're hungry, in the literal empty-tummy sort of way, spiritual hunger takes a back seat. Who would guess that God would fill the second by filling the first? Yet isn't that what Jesus did? He used food to connect with people and feed them the real nourishment: his message of redemption.

When I was little, we lived on the east side of Tucson, Arizona, in a rundown, two-bedroom adobe house with worn, stained carpet and faded, sticky linoleum floors. Mom was raising my older sister, Stacy, and me on a shoestring. She'd divorced my dad when I was just a few months old. (Turns out, those quickie Vegas weddings when you're still a teenager don't tend to end in happily ever after.) She was also putting

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herself through college, living off student loans and a small teacher's assistant salary, and dreaming of attending medical school.

Like most kids, I figured our life was like everyone's. Despite its imperfections, our tiny house on East Silver Street was home. It was where we pulled up to the table for meals. It was where we knew we belonged.

When Stacy and I begged Mom for our own rooms, she let me move into the only space available: the utility room. We squeezed a twin mattress onto the floor of the narrow room. There was no space for a bed frame. The mattress fit only when the door was wedged half-open, pressing deep into the corner of my mattress. So that's how that bedroom stayed for years—with a door permanently stuck forty-five degrees open. Since my makeshift bedroom was the only way out to the backyard, anyone wanting to go outside had to shimmy around the wedged door, stepping on my mattress in the process. Our large dog, Joya, went back and forth at will through the humongous doggy door, and to this day I remember the *flip-flop* of that rubber flap going all night long.

Why we had a large, hungry dog when we could barely afford to feed the humans in the house remains a mystery. Somehow our mom couldn't say no to our animal-loving requests. We had pets aplenty: rabbits, parakeets, guinea pigs, cats, and—at a high (low?) point—thirty-eight chickens in our urban-zoned backyard. Mom sold the eggs, a carton at a time, to her classmates and professors to earn a few extra bucks a month.

Our mom loved Stacy and me deeply. We knew this in our bones. I remember the way she would stay up all night with me when I had chronic ear infections even though she had school the next morning. To this day, Mom was always my biggest fan. She constantly told me that

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my future was bright and I could grow up to be anything I wanted. But she was stressed. Stressed about school . . . money . . . feeding us . . . raising us, all the while probably feeling—like most college students—barely an adult herself.

We ate simply, since Mom's cooking skills matched our sparse budget. Dinners were an unimaginative rotation of meat loaf, tacos, baked fish, and a weird black-eyed-pea-and-rice casserole that my mom inexplicably felt sophisticated serving. Her worn copy of *365 Ways to Cook Hamburger* was the only cookbook in our kitchen, unless you count *Diet for a Strong Planet*, which was more of a trendy, hippy political statement for Mom than an actual source of recipes, the aforementioned black-eyed-pea dish being the exception.

Packing lunches was extra taxing. Finding portable options to send with us to school was just too much for Mom to deal with. So, as elementary school students, Stacy and I took over the task. We were ill-equipped to turn the ingredients in our home—like a pound of frozen hamburger meat—into brown-bag meals. We could afford only the very cheapest lunch meat—a slim, plastic envelope of chopped, processed meat pressed so thin that our one-see-through-slice-per-sandwich portion couldn't have added a full gram of protein to any sandwich unlucky enough to receive it. And when the weekly lunch meat ration ran out, we turned to an apple or an orange or some aging, floppy celery for lunch. My sister and I were allocated one napkin a day to share at dinnertime, so the apple-for-lunch day usually left me with sticky fingers and chin that remained throughout recess. Sometimes we'd wrap up dry cornflakes in awkward wax paper—Saran wrap was too pricey for everyday use—and have that for our meal.

My school's lunchroom was where I first realized we were poor. What we eat speaks volumes about where we sit in the societal pecking

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order, created largely by accidents of birth and geography, and the cafeteria made me aware of that hierarchy. Other kids' lunches smelled like peanut butter sandwiches mingled with overripe bananas. My classmates brought prepackaged goodies every day, oblivious to the miracle in which they were participating. I remember vividly a classmate named Katy Rudder because she shared her daily bag of deliciously salty Fritos with me, unaware that I counted on her corn chips to help fill my empty belly. More than just sharing her meal, Katy shared the table with me, saving me a spot I called my own, no matter what flimsy lunch I toted—or didn't—to school.

From that spot in the cafeteria, I quietly marveled at the students who brought multiple courses in brown bags not only labeled with their names but decorated, too, with cute hearts or loopy smiley faces drawn by their moms. They might even find a sticker or a little note to go with their carefully prepared meal. Baggies, Saran wrap, and foil all spoke the language of the lunch-packing elite of my lower-middle-class neighborhood. I quickly gave up even writing my name on my brown bag. It felt silly and embarrassing to bother labeling such a meager package: "This lone apple belongs to Melissa. Keep out!" It seemed like an unnecessary precaution. What kid would pick up my bag and confuse it for their own, when theirs likely housed the heft and bulk of a fluffy white-bread sandwich stuffed with thick bologna slices and some mandarin orange wedges in light syrup in the plastic cup with its peel-back lid?

Then there were the hot-lunch kids, bused in from the fancy part of town. They could afford the forty-five-cent price tag for lunch every day. They got a new lunch card every Monday morning when they handed over their \$2.25 to Edna, the head lunch lady, who made her rounds to all the classrooms and called out for all the hot-lunch kids to

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line up and get their new cards. That number for me was the magic value of wealth: having \$2.25 to spend every single week on hot lunches. Hot-lunch kids didn't need loopy smiles on brown bags to know who they were; they had their names written in thick black ink by Edna. She was in charge of giving children identity and legitimacy via yellow cards that—as far as I was concerned—might as well have signified membership in an exclusive country club. The food we eat reinforces not just our ethnic or cultural identity but also our economic identity.

Sometimes I skipped lunch altogether. The charade of placing a small item in a bag and calling it lunch seemed not worth it if I were running late. Or if I just felt lazy. Or if I were sick of apples. (To this day, I take issue with the dieting advice that “If you aren't hungry for an apple, then you aren't hungry.” I *was* hungry—but not for an apple.) On these days I just floated around the cafeteria, hoping no one would notice that I was grazing Fritos and unwanted items other kids offered up before tossing in the garbage. Nonchalance is an attitude well practiced by a hungry child.

Feeding the Stomach and Heart

One day everything changed. One of the hot-lunch kids noticed I wasn't eating and asked why I hadn't gone to the office. I'm sure I looked confused. He told me that if a student forgets lunch at home, the school had a policy of giving that student a lunch with an IOU that could be paid the next day. This information was shared in an earnest effort to help, but it was spoken with a casualness that could only come from knowing your family could afford to pay back the debt. I hesitated. I was not authorized to make forty-five-cent purchases without prior approval. I knew we could not pay the next day—and even if we

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could, we wouldn't because there was no way I would bring an IOU home to my mom and add to her stress.

I knew life was hard for her, and I did my nine-year-old best to protect her. Surely I was just being selfish, turning my nose up at tissue-paper meat and mealy, aged fruit, craving the hot, breaded mystery-meat fingers that hot-lunch kids ate, so absentmindedly swirling them in ketchup. But hunger is a deep need, far stronger than logic or feelings. Before I could lose my nerve to lie, I ran to the office and blurted out that I had forgotten my lunch. Within minutes, I was scarfing down the greasy, burnt-flour meat coating—a taste that was brand new, but whose aroma I recognized from years of eating apples downwind from the hot-lunch table. I ate the fluffy little roll and the unappealing canned peas that no other student ate, and I gulped it all down with chocolate milk. A drink? At lunch? Surely, I had arrived. I ignored the fact that I was lactose intolerant and never drank milk at home. Because, hello, *chocolate*? It tasted like a milkshake. And full felt better than anything else when I had to face afternoon fourth-grade math.

I started out forgetting my lunch once a week or so. I felt guilty eating food that I hadn't purchased, but eating a hot meal was too good. Soon, I was forgetting my lunch any time we were out of the pressed-pastrami product at home. And then even on days when I had a sandwich, I craved the comfort that only protein, fiber, fat, and vitamins can give. I was hungry, and knowing food was feet away was enough to get me to lie once again to the school receptionist. The cycle sped up, and it became harder to leave it.

One day, however, the office monitor delivered a pink slip with my name on it: I was being called to the school office for principal-sized trouble. I smiled and shrugged to my classmates as I climbed out from my desk, acting as confused as they were about why a rule-following,

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good listener like me would be headed to the dreaded front office. But underneath my pretense of innocence, I knew: the jig was up. Luckily, I had a pressed meat and bread-heel sandwich with me that day. (Ah, the bread heel. Even today I avoid it when I pull bread from its package, slipping my fingers expertly under it to grab the softer, fluffier slices below. I was shocked to learn years later that my husband actually loves the heel, which is just one of the million ways I know we are meant for each other.)

On the short walk down the antiseptic-smelling, green-and-black pebbly-patterned school halls, I mentally reviewed all my options for addressing the debt, but I came up as empty as my stomach felt. The shame was crushing. *How had I become the kind of person who would steal food from the well-meaning school district?* I arrived at the principal's office timid and afraid, tears already filling my eyes. But the receptionist surprised me. She didn't mention my debt. And she didn't usher me in to see the principal. She just smiled and told me they were short-staffed in the cafeteria and were going to fill the slot with a student intern. That intern would help serve lunches to the kids and would get free lunch as payment. Would I be interested in the job? She made it seem like a business decision. No judgment. Just an option.

A job in food? I'd never dreamed of something so wonderful. Serving others and wearing a hairnet of my own sounded very grown-up. And I'd get to sit down to eat lunch while the other kids started recess.

I took the job. And though you might think I felt marginalized somehow, I didn't. I felt special. I got to know the lunch ladies because we served together and then we ate together, even Edna. They all adored me. They always let me pick my hairnet first, letting me have the pale brown ones to match my blonde hair, while they wore the black ones

even though they clashed with their own puffy platinum hairdos. I started on the food line, serving a dinner roll or overly firm gelatin cubes (“finger jello,” the menu called it) with a gloved hand, and I moved up quickly to hot-vegetable duty, where I was entrusted with an oversized metal spoon to scoop hot canned green beans or corn onto the compartmentalized plastic plates.

I became friendly with George, the jovial bald janitor who handed out milk cartons to the kids as they passed by the large metal cooler. On days that I gulped my milk down a little too quickly, George would sneak me a second little carton with a smile and a wink, before closing up the cooler and heading back to the business of emptying trash and sweeping floors. (In fifth grade, when our teachers announced one morning that George had suddenly died from a heart attack, no one else in my class seemed the tiniest bit concerned by the news, but I burst into tears, and I teared up for weeks whenever I reached out to collect the milk handed to me by his replacement.)

The receptionist, the lunch ladies, George, and Katy Rudder changed my life, and food was their main tool. Yet they did more than feed my body. They offered me compassion and made me feel valuable. By sharing God’s provision with me, they reminded me that I was worthy of receiving his gifts, of food and of belonging. One small shift in degree can, over time, completely alter the trajectory of a path. Each of these kind people caused that one small shift in degree. How much of my academic success was due to their role in not only filling my stomach but also my heart? I’ll never know. But I’ve been hungry in a classroom and I’ve been not hungry in a classroom, and every time I’d choose not hungry. I am kinder, more focused, more generous, more creative, and more grateful when both my body and soul are nourished—when I feel fed and valued. I want that for everyone.

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Food Unites

Food is one of God’s great equalizers and unifiers. Everyone needs food to survive. Hunger hits us all the same. Without food, we realize quickly that we human beings are similar more than we’re different. All of us also need God and his goodness and grace. Every meal we eat is a reminder of our shared dependence on God.

And every meal can be a reminder to share God’s provision with others. Countless scriptural examples demonstrate our responsibility to share the earth’s food. In Exodus, when the Israelites complained to God about their hunger as they were being delivered from Egyptian slavery, God offered them manna. This free food literally fell from the sky for people to pick up according to God’s command to take only according to their need. No one was to hoard. When the people obeyed, “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little” (Exodus 16:18). Those with access were commanded to share the excess rather than assume privilege, and in fact if anyone did try to squirrel away extra manna for themselves, it became rotten and wormy and useless by morning. In the New Testament, Paul quoted this very verse from Exodus right after he declared, “The goal is equality” (2 Corinthians 8:14–15). This concept feels countercultural in today’s system of consumer-goods allocation. But Jesus spent a lot of his time feeding the hungry. If you haven’t read the book of Luke, I highly recommend it. Jesus ate his way through it, and he used food to equalize the marginalized and remind them—and everyone else—of their worth.

Jesus used food to break down the artificial, societal barriers we humans build. He fed the hungry, miraculously using small portions to serve many. And Jesus didn’t just give food *to* the marginalized; he ate

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with them. It wasn't just what he gave but *who he sat with* to share a meal that unified. He welcomed the tax collector, the prostitute, the sinner, and the misfit to the table.

We might be tempted to donate money to a food bank and then cross our biblical calling to feed the poor off our spiritual to-do list. But that's not how Jesus worked. Katy Rudder didn't hand me a few corn chips and send me on my way. We shared a table . . . and our lives. Katy was the hands and feet of Jesus to me throughout my elementary school years.

Food, like a cafeteria, can unite us, or it can divide us. When I was hungry, I felt alone and isolated; I was one of the have-nots, unaware that others had also been dropped into the same bucket. When people shared with me and made sure I was fed, I felt their compassion and I felt community. I felt that I belonged. Turns out, this is a universal truth. Hunger and despair are inextricably linked, which is probably why Jesus talked about hunger and thirst so often. Through the actions of various people, God invited me into equality and unity—I felt both equal to the other kids who ate their meals and connected to them by our shared experience—and he invites us all. He used food to show me that I am a worthy part of this world, and I am a worthy part of him. In that elementary school cafeteria, God met me and invited me to be closer to him. Jesus is called the Bread of Life for good reason. While Jesus is our truest, deepest nourishment, our earthly food is a small experience of that deep eternal satisfaction. Meals in the modern world divide us sometimes more than unite us as they reflect socioeconomic and other divisions. But God's compassionate plan is for us to use food to unify and equalize instead.

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RSVP to the Invitation into Compassion

- Jesus told us in Matthew 25:40 that how we treat others is how we are treating him: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Next time you walk or drive by someone in need, give them the honor and dignity of your eye contact. Try to see Jesus in their eyes. Even acknowledging someone’s presence is honoring and validating.
- Ask your church if they have a food ministry or food access activities. Consider volunteering even for an event or two. Doing so may open your eyes to how you can be involved in making access to food equal for all.
- Equality begins when we connect outside of our normal social circles. Invite someone who is different from you—maybe you have different backgrounds, belief systems, or cultural histories—to share a meal.
- Find a local food-access program and spend a few minutes poking around on its website to learn about what it does. Click “volunteer” or “find out more” to learn about specific needs in your area and how you can be the hands and feet of Jesus in someone else’s story.

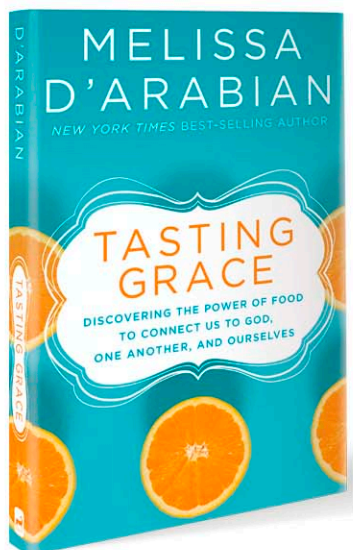
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