

Jen Thompson

RETURN TO JESUS

An Invitation to Abide with Him
in Every Beautiful, Stressful,
or Tedious Moment





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WaterBrook

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For Patrick:

You modeled to me what the love of Christ was when I was at my most unlovable. You have sat by my side and walked with me hand in hand through my darkest moments. Thank you for never giving up on me. Even when the world would say you should have. You are forever my soulmate. You are my home.

For Sophia, Amelia, Nylah, and Patrick:

You have taught me more than you will ever know, and my love for you cannot be adequately expressed with words put to any page. Just know I am always and forever in your corner. Cheering for you. Believing in you. Praying for you. Arms wide open and shoulders available for tears—should you feel you have fallen and ever need a place to land.

For anyone who has felt tired, worn, stretched, lost, confused, angry, unlovable, hurt, or unsure if there is a place for you at the table:

I write these words for you. There is always a place. The invitation is always extended. Jesus is waiting. Whenever you are ready to return.

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THE INVITATION

I love receiving an invitation, especially if that invitation arrives in the mail.

I come from a time long, long ago. A time when digital invitations weren't a thing. Back in those ancient days, when computers were still black and white and the "internet" was a new word that carried a lot of mystery and promise, invitations arrived enclosed in stamped envelopes. To either accept or decline this personal request of my presence, I had to either call the sender or mail an RSVP card. Nowadays, paper invitations usually only arrive for select special occasions like graduations, weddings, bridal showers, or baby showers. But the smile they bring to my face remains.

I love looking at the intimate details—the fonts, the words, the imagery, the ornate wisps and flourishes. These things make the invitation unique and personal. The beauty of it all makes me pause and realize the thought that went into this singular piece of paper.

Don't get me wrong: while paper invites give me all the feels, I still love a digital invitation. Any invitation, really. Because to be invited means someone thought of me. My presence means something to someone. And that feels good.

We all receive invitations regularly. Some arrive printed on fancy paper in the mail. Others land in our inboxes. Some via

text. And others are verbal. With each invitation comes an underlying message: we are seen, we matter, and someone out there enjoys our company.

Yet, with all these invitations, there is one single, consistent invitation that exists for everyone. An invitation from One who sees us, One who loves us, One who enjoys our company more than we can possibly comprehend. An invitation from Jesus to meet with Him throughout our days. He knocks at the door of our hearts and asks to steep every facet of our lives in His love—our personal lives, our relationships, and our collective Christian experience.

His request arrives in different ways throughout our day, but, sadly, we are often too busy or distracted to even notice. We don't really accept or decline; we just keep plugging along. Our eyes open, our bodies rise, and we move forward with the day, sliding easily into our habits and our rhythms. Doing all those things we usually do—those dirty dishes in the sink, the laundry piled high, and the emails, SignUpGenius requests, Venmo transfers, texts, and more—without a second glance at His invitation. Our daily demands pile up, leaving us frustrated, overwhelmed, and exhausted.

We miss the chance to be refreshed by His presence, find healing in His words, and find direction for our lives. Instead, we're running the other way. We're searching for significance and meaning in the trivial. One day bleeds into the other, and it all starts to feel the same. We are stuck in the mundane.

Yet somewhere deep in our hearts and souls, we know we were created for so much more. We can feel it. There is more to this life than hurried days, packed schedules, fast food on the road, and the never-ending scroll on our phones.

This *more* we long for waits for us. This *more* we long for—whether we know it or not—is to be present with the Lord. And every day, in every way, Jesus reaches out a hand and invites us

to experience His abundant life. His kingdom here on Earth. We need only accept.

Like with all requests, the choice is yours. Will you accept what has been offered and receive His peace, love, joy, and many gifts that are waiting for you? Will you sit with the Almighty, feel His tug on your heart, develop rhythms of return that work for you, and experience the blessings He longs to give?

A Personalized Invitation

The idea of an invitation from Jesus seems so abstract, though, doesn't it? I mean, what does it even look like?

Like a personalized invitation in the mail, I believe His call is different for each of us.

My invitation arrives when I look out the window at the leaves blowing in the wind on a fall morning and remember God created all this beauty. Jesus calls me to Him when I hold a friend who has lost her husband, and I remember that while there are no words I can say to take away her pain, God blesses those who mourn with His comfort. I see the invitation when I snuggle with my children and say prayers at night after a long day. If I really stop and think about it, I see Jesus's beautiful and tender invitation all throughout my day.

An invitation to pause and give thanks.

An invitation to see the good.

An invitation to say a prayer for a stranger.

An invitation to meditate on Scripture.

An invitation to sit beside a loved one in pain.

An invitation to live in the joy and the sorrow.

An invitation to love the unlovable.

An invitation to place my bare feet in the grass and look up at the sky and breathe in the gift of the air and the sun on my face and acknowledge that this day was not promised, but I at least

have this moment.

When I accept His invitation to return, these moments with my Creator become the altar I worship on. I return to Him in the grind and praise Him for His peace in the chaos. I return to Him in the pain and praise Him for His comfort. I return to Him with my shame and praise Him for His grace. Through every return to Jesus, I am filled with Him.

My relationship with Jesus is the most profound relationship of love and grace I will ever have the privilege of experiencing. Yet I often settle for so much less than what is available. And I miss Him. I miss the love. The peace. The joy. The grace. The relationships. The unity. The healing. All that is found in Jesus. Always in Jesus.

Friend, your choice to either accept or decline does not affect His love for you, but it does affect your days. Your life. Because waiting on the other end of that invitation to meet with Love Himself are the very best gifts you could ever receive. It is an invitation to experience a bit of heaven on Earth. An invitation for your eternity with Him to begin right now. Because heaven isn't just waiting for you on the other side of your last breath. Jesus invites you to taste the bread and drink the wine and see and feel and behold the miracle of the gifts of eternity here and now. Whenever and however you choose to meet with Him. With whatever rhythms and habits you build into your days.

Rhythms to Return

There are rhythms to my days. I wake up and make my bed. I feed the cats (because this must happen first thing. They would have it no other way). I make lunches for the kids before they head out the door. I drive the kids to school. I start a load of laundry. Then I open the stack of journals and devotions sitting on the kitchen island. My day begins and unfolds as usual. I am

a creature of habit, and routine is my friend.

In the mindless patterns of my day, my soul longs for more. I long to be with Jesus. I long to return to Him, no matter the season I'm in—quiet and reserved, busy and stressed, joyful and pleasant, painful and filled with tears, or somewhere in between. I long to walk with Him through it all because He is my rock, my salvation, my love, and so much more. And I want to share with you the rhythms I've set to recognize and accept His invitation to return, and the gifts I've found as I've looked to Him in all things.

I have wrestled with my faith and my doubt, with my shame and the lies that I was unlovable. I have been confused and distressed by the words and actions of friends who love the Lord as I do but see the world so differently. I have confessed, shed tears, sought repentance, and received grace. My heart has been undone by the love of the Lord, and I have seen and experienced this love from Him and through others. I have intentionally set patterns of return to Jesus through it all because He is the only Way, Truth, and Light that can guide me on this tumultuous journey we call life.

Returning to Jesus has changed how I experience my days. He has changed my relationships with others. He has changed the way I interact with the communities where I find myself. For that reason, I've broken this book into three parts: your personal return, relational return, and collective return.

Your personal return covers how you can individually return to Jesus as you press forward in your day with all that it requires of you. Part two covers your relational return—how to invite Jesus into your close and personal relationships to experience repair, connection, and so much more with those you love. Finally, part three details how you can return to Jesus with other people collectively—when you gather on Sundays at church, or at a neighborhood potluck. You'll discover how to invite Him

into those places and spaces where you reside with your community.

At the end of each chapter is a prayer, a verse or quote to meditate on, questions for reflection, and the invitation to return. The prayer will give you a place to start when reaching out to God. If you feel led, continue the conversation with Him. He loves to hear from you. The verse/quote and the questions offer you a moment to pause and unpack parts of the chapter. Breathe deep and let the Lord guide your thoughts. Finally, the invitations are suggestions to help guide you toward new habits and patterns. They are meant to help you recognize the presence of Jesus in your daily life so that you can meet with Him at any time, day or night, in countless ways. But I know that life is busy and time is a precious commodity. So I've broken down these invitations into three intervals of time: one minute, one hour, and one day. Choose the invitation that works for you right now.

These rhythms of return will help you to make Jesus a part of those habits and routines you already have established. They will point you back to the Lord. As your relationship with Him deepens, your life will be transformed in the most miraculous of ways.

Jesus is waiting for you to turn and face Him. To give it all to Him. To stop running from Him and to start running toward Him. To rest in His Presence. To lay it at His feet and trust Him enough to never pick it up again. To give Him the chaos of your days and the all-encompassing pain of your grief. To trust Him with those things you want no one to discover. To believe He can take what is broken and turn it into something more beautiful than you ever could have pictured. To meet you in your neighborhood. Your church. At your dining room table. And while you sit with your knees pressed uncomfortably on the hard floor, folding what feels like an endless pile of laundry.

He is in the mundane and the monotonous.

He is in the miraculous and the glorious.

He is in the moment when you drop to your knees because your world has just stopped.

And He is in all the wonder you will ever behold as you breathe in each of your breaths.

He is with your enemy.

And He is with your closest companion.

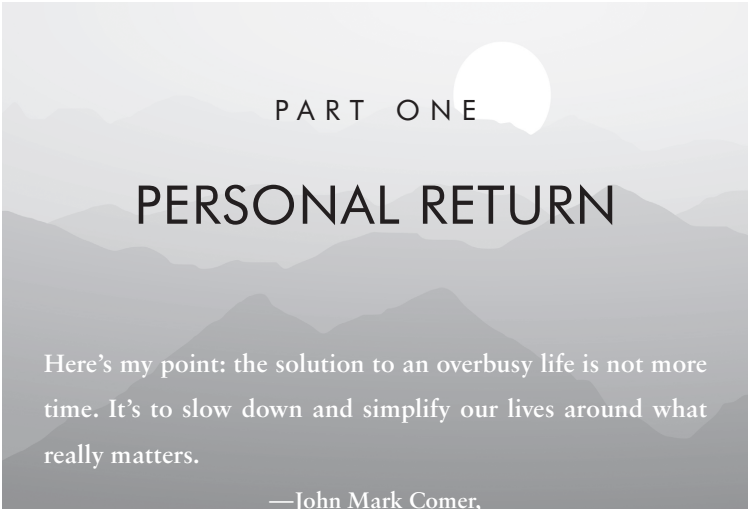
Friend, I have lived in the valley made of sand, I have climbed to the mountaintop with all its splendor, and I have traveled gravel roads in the in-between. And in it all, He has been there. Even when I forgot to reach for Him. Even when I didn't acknowledge Him. Even when I tried to run from Him.

He has always been there.

He will always be here.

Waiting. Reaching. Loving.

Inviting us to return.



PART ONE

PERSONAL RETURN

Here's my point: the solution to an overbusy life is not more time. It's to slow down and simplify our lives around what really matters.

—John Mark Comer,

The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry

RETURN TO LOVE

The Greatest Gift You've Been Given

If we knew how much He loves us, we would always be ready to face life—both its pleasures and its troubles.

—Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*

The spring day was beautiful, cloudless, with a gentle breeze that helped take the edge off and keep the beads of sweat from forming on brows. It was perfect for strawberry-picking with friends at a local farm where bright red berries dotted the lush green landscape, begging us to put them in our buckets (and a few in our mouths). Visitors, trying to take advantage of the warm weather, filled the parking lots and overflowed into the grass fields.

Soon, the excitement of finding a ripe berry died down and our children began to cry, “It’s hot” and “I’m tired.” Their groans were an indication it was time to head back. With full buckets held by red-stained fingers, we headed to the minivan in the overflow parking.

My daughter has always been a strong-willed child, and this day was no exception to her boundary-pushing, limit-testing way of life. We were walking together in a tight group, and my daughter was next to me. Then, she broke free. Just like that. She went from safely by my side to running in a full sprint dead

ahead, and in an instant, she was out of my reach.

She wasn't looking at what was in front of her. She was just running as children often do, with her legs pressing forward and an unawareness unique to childhood. She didn't see the rear lights of a car flash red. I knew what that meant, though—that car would soon be in motion, and my daughter was barreling straight for it.

Fear flooded every inch of my being. I yelled as loud as I knew how, my legs racing toward her, but not quite fast enough. Sweat formed on my brow as I screamed, "Nylah! Nylah! Stop! Stop! Stop!"

She was completely unaware of the danger, so engrossed in what she was doing that she could not hear my voice. Finally, she heard me and stopped—an arm's length away from the vehicle. Nylah turned to face me with an oblivious smile while the car began to back out. My body shook, acutely aware of how close I had come to possibly losing her.

When I caught up to Nylah, I scooped her up and wrapped her little body into mine. Consumed with my love for her, I smelled her hair and felt the softness of her freckled cheeks. As I held her, I was overwhelmed with gratitude for the gift of this sweet, strong-willed child and the way her small frame felt against my own. Feeling her in my arms carried a new weight—it had more meaning than just minutes before. I thanked God for keeping her safe, and in the embrace of tenderness between mother and child, God reached for me.

"Here. See Me. In this moment, I'm here. And I love you."

Warmth flooded my soul. I knew without any doubt that my Creator, my Father, felt the same unreserved tenderness for me. He knew the smell of my hair, the shape of my face, and the creases of my personality.

And just as I could see what Nylah could not, God sees the direction I'm headed, perceives the dangers I'm blind to, and

knows the lies I believe. But like a strong-willed child who thinks they know best, I run. He calls out to me. He offers me the truth of who He is and who I am to Him, but I keep pressing forward in the direction I am headed. I focus on the demands weighing on me—my work, my kids, the bills, the dishes, the laundry, life—and feel a soul-level depletion settle in my bones. I am too engrossed to hear His voice calling to me. When I finally hear Him, stop, and turn, He's right there waiting to scoop me up and place me safely back into the comfort of His arms.

He does not greet me with condemnation, guilt, or the many things I attempt to place on myself as a result of being human in a fallen world. No, when God cries out for me and I return to Him, I am wrapped in love.

When I picked up my daughter and held her, I knew the smell of her freshly washed, strawberry-blonde hair. I knew the way her eyes crinkle in the corner when she smiles. I knew the look she gives when she is being mischievous. I knew how her body folded into mine. I knew every inch of her because I had spent nearly every day with her since she came into this world.

God has spent eternity with you on His mind. He knows you more intimately than you know yourself. He longs for you to know the depth of His infinite love because He is the embodiment of perfect Love. He is love without condition. There are no strings attached. His love is always there. Always waiting. Always inviting.

No matter how far or how long you run. No matter if you aren't listening. No matter the lies you believe. No matter what your head, your heart, or others may tell you—God is there, waiting to scoop you up in His tender arms. To welcome you home with His loving embrace. An invitation to abide in the fullness of His Presence. An invitation to meet with and settle your whole self into the warmth and security of His love.

Return to Jesus

For a very long time, I struggled to believe God loved me.

I heard the messages at church telling me Jesus died for me. I heard the words spoken in sermons and shared at Bible studies. I was told time and time again that I was infinitely and forever loved by my Father above. I sang songs about Jesus loving me, had conversations about this gift all were offered, and would nod in agreement with friends who said things my head knew to be true.

God loves me. Nod. Nod. Nod.

Jesus died for me. Nod. Nod. Nod.

My head understood the invitation and my words declared the truth of this gift, but my heart couldn't catch up with my head and my words. I couldn't hold those truths, because I was being held ransom by lies: I was too broken. Too damaged. Too far gone. I had spent too long away from Him. God doesn't want *me*.

Have you struggled to believe that God loves you, too?

If you answered yes, my guess is somewhere along the way, you picked up a message that said you are unworthy, you aren't enough, you aren't loveable as you are. Then you took that message and made it your truth. You tucked it deep inside your heart, where it festered and grew. Now anytime something, or someone, tries to tell you otherwise, you nod your head in agreement—but deep down, you still feel undeserving, inadequate, or unredeemable.

If this resonates with your heart and if you struggle to believe you can abide in God's love, as you are, with no strings attached—please hear me when I say you are not alone. Many of us grapple with this lie because of trauma and wounding. And many more feel unloved simply because we live in a culture that is con-

sumed with performance, applauds overachievement and success in all forms, and publicly shames those who have been deemed unworthy.

I have good news, though: you can silence the lies that hold your heart captive.

I found freedom through trusted friends who were willing to sit with me, study the Word, and listen to me talk about how I just couldn't really believe I was loved. They were gentle with me and prayed for me. They didn't grow impatient or tired of the fact that I sometimes sounded like a record stuck on repeat—declaring all the reasons I was unworthy and couldn't let my heart grab hold of this truth. I broke through the falsities with counseling and by traveling to the hard places in my life. I untangled trauma. I healed. With time and patience, I learned more about who God really is and who I really am to Him. And every time I would forget, God would reach down and remind me of the depth of His love.

He reached down when my daughter was just inches away from being struck by a car. "Here. See Me. In this moment, I'm here. And I love you." And this wasn't the first time. Even before I held my daughter close, still shaking from the fear of losing her, the weight of His love had cracked my heart open, threatening to undo me, at the birth of my children.

When my first child was born and placed in my arms, I could sense that there was something so much bigger at play than I had ever grasped before. This screaming bundle of mashed hair, wrinkled skin, and deep-blue eyes had not come into this world offering any reason for me to love her. She wasn't asking how she could help. She wasn't caring for me. She wasn't affirming me or bringing me gifts. On the contrary, she was taking up quite a bit of my time, energy, and resources. But none of that mattered. I loved her. And not just a subtle, surface-level, passing love. I loved this child with a ferocity that echoed through

my bones. And just when I thought my heart could not possibly hold more love, we had another child, and I learned that love could expand and stretch and grow. With each experience, a question rose in me: *If I love my own children this much, how much more does my Creator love me?*

This one question started an avalanche in my heart. I had believed I could not be loved simply for who I am, but God showed me that I am loved more deeply than I could possibly comprehend because I was His. Love was no longer about my performance or my worthiness or how put-together I seemed on a given day. It was about God. It was about the perfect love my Heavenly Father has for me. A love He made known through His very own Son—Jesus.

John 3:16 is a verse we see often. It's on billboards off the highway, on handwritten signs, on greeting cards, on the black stripes under a sports player's eyes. And, at times, being yelled on street corners of busy cities. It may feel a bit overused, washed down, and sometimes even abused. But let's not let the commercialism of the verse strip it of its power:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.¹

Not “for God was so upset with us” or “for God so needed to control us.” Not “for God so liked us” or “for God so wanted to win us over.” No. For God so *loved* us. And not just the good people, or the ones we deem worthy—*the world*. Me, you, all of us. And He loved us so much that He gave us His one and only Son to save us.

My heart was overwhelmed with the thought of losing my child on that grassy field many years ago. That “what if” scenario held a pain that seemed too much to bear. My heart breaks

deeply for those I know, and also those I don't, who have experienced the death of a child. Yet our God chose to walk that tragic road. He chose the pain. He chose the unimaginable because He so loved.

When we return to Jesus, we return to that love. Not disapproval, manipulation, or anger, but love. And slowly, gently, and tenderly, God replaces the lies we harbor—you aren't good enough; you aren't worthy; you are too damaged, too broken, too far gone—with the truth of His love.

He gave His life for you. The Maker of all the stars in the infinite galaxies chose you. You are worth dying for.²

Friend, God loves you. It's okay if you aren't ready for that truth to sink in yet. God knows your hurts. He knows your heart. He knows the healing that needs to take place before you can fully accept the depth of His love. The beautiful thing is, there isn't a time limit. It isn't an "act now or lose the offer" kind of thing. His offer is forever, and He will wait as long as it takes.

The Presence of Love

Whether you aren't quite sure about the whole Jesus thing, believe with your head but aren't quite there with your heart, or are completely arrested by the love of the Lord, you can practice rhythms of returning to His love.

When you are feeling unlovable, I pray that lie is replaced with this truth: you are loved. This love is not based on your life circumstance. Your status. Your gifts. Your weaknesses. What you can accomplish in a day. It has nothing to do with how manicured your lawn may be or how well-behaved your kids are during the Sunday service. This love cannot be earned. It cannot be taken away. When you are feeling unlovable, repeat this truth: "I am a child of the Creator of the Universe. I am made for this time and this space for a reason. I am pursued. I am loved."³

Say it as many times as needed. Make it your mantra. Tape it to a paper on your mirror. Talk to friends and ask them to pray for you. Be bold and specific in your requests. Repeat to yourself that you are loved. Pray for the Lord to take your heart captive and bombard you with His love. Wait for it. He will.

When you are feeling undeserving, I pray you know this love is a free gift we all have been given because the Creator of the Universe is Love. We were made by Love and we were created for Love to reside within us, to flow from us and through us. Not one of us is deserving of this gift, but it is one bestowed on all. When you are feeling undeserving, repeat this truth: “This love is a free gift given to all. It is the gift of love from Love.⁴ It is not something I earn. It is not something deserved. It is my gift.” Say it again: “It is my gift. It does not give as the world gives. It is eternally mine. No strings attached.”

When you are feeling unredeemable, I pray you know that no matter how far you fall, there is a loving hand reaching down to pull you up. I have felt the loving hand of the Lord reach down many times in my life, and I have had to learn how to recognize that hand and grab hold. You can grab hold, too. When Jesus bowed His head and gave His Spirit for all creation, He took it all: Every pain. Every betrayal. Every loss. Every sin. He took it and declared, “It is finished.”⁵ When you are feeling unredeemable, repeat this truth: “I am redeemed by His scars. There is nothing in this world beyond redemption. All I need to do is lay it at His feet. I am redeemed.”⁶

And if you feel as if too much time has passed, as if you have wandered through the desert for too long and have forgotten the faith that once shaped and formed you, remember, it's never too late to return. There is no amount of time that is too great and no hourglass keeping track of the sand that has fallen. Love has no time limit. You will always be welcomed, and His arms will always be extended and waiting.

Let God's love wash over you. Let it undo you. There is no greater love than the love God has for you. For me. For us. The world. Sit in that space for as long as needed.

Abide in His Presence.

You, my friend, are loved.



Rhythms of Return

Prayer

Giver of Love,

Undo me. Take all the lies that are twisted inside—the words of the enemy that tell me I am unlovable or unworthy—and replace them with this truth: I am loved. Your heart for me burns hotter than the heat of a thousand suns. Your compassion for me extends beyond the farthest galaxy. The number of strands of hair on my head, breaths I will breathe, and nights my eyes will close in slumber have been logged by You for all of time. Your thoughts of me stretch on for an eternity that is beyond my grasp.

You have held me under Your wing. You have reached for me and are reaching for me and will always be reaching. No matter how far I run. No matter how long it takes.

There is nothing to keep Your love away. Even when I don't listen. Even when I refuse to receive. Even when I run from You.

You are still there.

Help me to grab on, Lord. Help me take that truth to heart and return to it over and over and over in my day. Transform me. Bombard me. Captivate me.

I am loved. I am loved. I am loved.

Thank You, Jesus.

Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. Do you believe in your heart that God loves you, as is, with no strings attached? If not, why do you think believing in His love is hard for you?
2. What are some of the lies you harbor in your heart? Do these lies keep you in a space of believing you are unlovable?
3. Love means a lot of things to a lot of people. What does love mean to you?
4. What are some ways you experience love? Ask God to reveal His love to you in tangible ways this week.

Invitation to Return

One Minute: Throughout this week, make *I am loved* your mantra. Tape it to your mirror. To the dashboard of your car. To the fridge. Use it as the background image in your phone. Repeat it over and over and over, and ask God to make this your truth. Saying the words won't take much time but will have a powerful impact on your heart and soul.

One Hour: Pick a special place where you can sit in quiet reflection. Play some peaceful music in the background or, if you prefer, sit in silence. As you sit, ask the Lord to fill you with His love. Feel it all around you and in you. Sit in that space, as uncomfortable as it may be, for as long as you feel led. Ask Him to show you what it means to be loved by Him. Embrace that love and let it take you captive. After you have spent time bathed in the love of the Lord, journal about your experience.

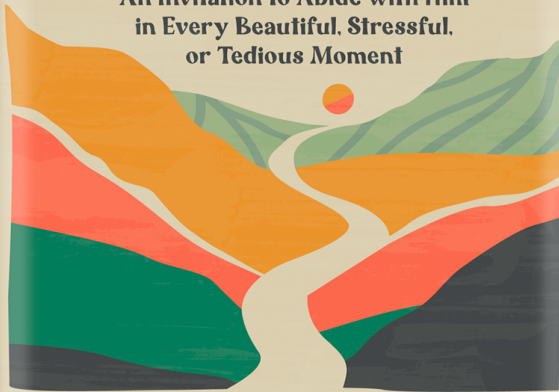
One Day: Reserve a day to be in the presence of the Lord. He is always there, inviting us to meet with Him, but

it is so easy for the distractions of the day to rob us of the love we feel when we abide with Him. Decide in advance what that looks like. Is it sitting in a beautiful chapel? Hiking in the woods? Taking a trip to a local spa? Where can you go to simply *be*? Pray over this day in advance and trust His love will meet you there.

Jen Thompson

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