

Because God's Love is Perfect, I Don't Have to Be

Chapter 2 ~ From *A Confident Heart* by Renee Swope

It is a rare soul indeed who has been sought after for who she is—not because of what she can do, or what others can gain from her, but simply for herself . . . so what are we to conclude? Often we conclude that there is nothing in our hearts worth knowing. Whoever and whatever this mystery called *I* must be, it cannot be much.

John Eldredge and Brent Curtis¹

As I pulled into my driveway, I noticed an envelope taped to our front door. Immediately I tried to remember what I had done to deserve a thank-you note, but couldn't think of anything. I was so excited I didn't even open our garage door. Instead I parked in the driveway, hopped out of my car, and walked to the porch to get my note.

Much to my dismay, I discovered it was not a thank-you note. Instead, it was a notice. Someone on the neighborhood architectural committee had stopped by to inform us that our windowsills and front porch columns needed to be repaired and painted within thirty days, or we'd be fined. I was humiliated!

Did our house look bad enough to warrant an official notice? Had they taken the time to peek through the windows and see our new floors and kitchen renovations? I defended myself to the "neighborhood police," who weren't even there to listen. I imagined them sitting around a table, talking about us in a homeowners' meeting while writing other citations for excessive yard debris and inappropriate paint colors.

My humiliation turned to frustration when my husband got home a few minutes later. He didn't know what to think as I wagged the envelope in my hand and told him, "There are four hundred homes in our neighborhood, and plenty of them are in much worse condition. How could they even see our windowsills and front porch? There is at least forty feet between our house and the curb."

We had huge Bradford pear trees in our yard that blocked the view from the street so I knew someone must have come onto our property. To prove my point, I marched to the street and announced that I could barely see the windows or columns. "Our house looks fine." I insisted.

It really did—from a distance. But as I walked back up to the porch and looked more closely, I had to admit that the winter winds and summer heat had worn the paint thin. It was peeling in a few places and the wood on our thirty-foot columns needed some repair. Since we had spent months (and most of our money) replacing countertops, floors, and carpets inside, we started making plans to complete the outside work ourselves. What we thought would take a few hours turned into several days. We spent weekends on ladders scraping, sanding, priming, and painting.

From a Distance

The more we sanded and scraped, the more the paint peeled. As I painted, I thought about how our house really did look fine from a distance. Then I thought about how much I can be just like my house. From a distance, I look like I'm doing just fine.

Sometimes it's hard to let people know how we're really doing. We don't want to be high maintenance, right? We surely don't want people to see the peeling paint of our imperfections or the rotting attitudes in the wood boards of our minds. It's embarrassing for people to see our flaws and failures, so we work hard to look like we're doing fine from a distance.

Sometimes I think we tell people we're fine even when we're not, because we want to be fine. Or we hope that by saying we are fine, eventually we will be. Other times we act like we're fine because others expect us to be. Of course, there are days when hormones trump all good manners and reason. Days when anyone within ten feet knows you are not fine. Although we tell people we're fine, what we really mean is that we are **Frazzled, Irritated, Neurotic, and Exhausted!**

Being honest about who we are and how we are doing is especially risky when it comes to our insecurities. We fear that if people know we doubt ourselves, they'll start doubting us too. We walk into work on Monday morning with a smile, hoping no one will ask about our weekend. The sting of rejection is still raw after not being invited to a coworker's barbecue when everyone else was. Or we pull up in the carpool line, and someone asks about Christmas. "It was fine," we say, holding back the tears that follow a holiday filled with pain, strife, loneliness, and disappointment.

Sunday morning is the worst. How many of us rush out the door, fuss about what our kids are wearing and how they are acting, drive to church arguing with our husband, and then tell ourselves we're the worst mom and wife on the planet? We're convinced if anyone found out who we really are they wouldn't let us into church. Then we walk into the service—smiling. Someone asks how we're doing and we lie through our teeth: "I'm fine! We're doing great!"

Pretending

Pretending leads to hiding and isolation. What we need is someone who will pursue us and accept us even though we're flawed. Yet most of us doubt anyone would ever stick with us if we let them get too close. So we put up walls and hide our struggles, even from God, hoping we'll convince Him and everyone else that we're fine.

Eventually, though, we find ourselves in the shadows of doubt, convinced that we aren't worth knowing or pursuing. Slowly we begin to believe we have to be perfect to be loved and accepted. We know we never will be—but we'll die trying, won't we?

For much of my life, I put expectations of perfection on myself because I thought if I let others see my weakness and insecurities they would think less of me—and eventually leave

me. My parents divorced when I was two, and my dad remarried. Although we spent time together and he would often give me things, it was hard for him to give much of himself.

Yet I longed for my father's love and approval. I thought if I could only make good grades, be prettier or smarter, accomplish things, or get the kind of degree he wanted me to get, then my daddy would value me. As an adult, I have come to realize that I believed I wasn't worth staying for, and if I had only done something differently my father would not have left us.

"You're not worth staying for" was a lie, but it became the truth through which I filtered my worth in all of my relationships. I tried to earn my worth through a performance-based value system, convinced that if I did the right things, said the right things, wore the right things, and looked the right way, then I'd be worth staying for.

My life was far from perfect, but I didn't want anyone to know. On the outside everything looked "fine," yet on the inside I was haunted by thoughts of never being good enough. I felt like I could never do enough to measure up.

Oh how I longed for someone to see past the exterior façade and look into the secret places of my heart. I wanted to be known and loved for who I was. Yet if I let my guard down, I was afraid someone would say I was too sensitive or too serious. It had happened before. So I pretended everything was fine. With each attempt to keep others impressed and distant, I stepped further into the shadows of doubt. Even though I was surrounded by people, my insecurities convinced me I was all alone.

By the time I was in college, I couldn't pretend anymore. I ran out of paint. The columns of my life started to crumble. The sills around the windows of my heart began to rot.

Although I had been going to church off and on for years, I had never really understood the messages I heard. I went to church because my friends were going. I went because my boyfriend invited me, which meant I'd get to spend more time with him on Sunday. Finally, in my early twenties, I started going for me. I started listening and truly hearing what was being said.

One day I realized I couldn't keep pretending. I was not fine, and I couldn't fake it anymore.

Up Close and Personal

Slowly but surely, the walls around my heart started to come down. Over time God revealed His heart to me through sermons at a nearby church and books I read, but more than anything He spoke to me through the Bible. Through His written Word on the page and His living Word in the person of Christ, I came to know an up close and personal Savior who pursues imperfect women like me. I read stories that echoed the struggles and desires of my heart. Tucked within those stories I discovered God's promises and how He responds to the longings and hurts of His children. I read words that gave me hope and assured me that I was not alone.

One of my favorite pictures of God's pursuit of us is in the Gospel of John, chapter 4. The story's main character is referred to as the Samaritan woman, but I like to call her Sam. It makes her feel more like the real woman she was, with a heart that had been broken just like so many of ours. Sam had searched for years to find acceptance, love, and approval in the heart of a man.

She'd been married five times. In her culture women could not divorce their husbands, so she had been discarded by five men and was now living with a man who didn't think she was worth committing to. We meet her one day while she is running errands and running away from those who knew all about her flaws and failed marriages. Feeling imperfect and ashamed, she walked to the well alone that day.

Typically, women came to the well in the morning or early evening. They traveled together in the cool of the day, avoiding the scorching heat of the sun since they would be carrying heavy jars filled with water back to their homes. But not Sam; she walked there all by herself.

Many theologians believe that instead of avoiding the scorching heat of the sun, she went to the well at noon to avoid the scorching pain of others' rejection and judgment. The weight of the water-filled jar in the heat must have been almost unbearable, but the weight of her neighbors' words, reminding her of her failures and imperfections, was more than she could take.

I imagine at one time Sam had walked to the well with the other women from her small town. They would talk about their day, their husbands, and their kids—but then they started talking about her. Whispers and condescending glances must have come after her first divorce, judgment and shame after her second. At what point had Sam distanced herself? Had she made excuses to stay back while the other women went ahead, insisting she was "fine," but would go later? Let's pick up her story where she meets Jesus:

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" . . .

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." (John 4:7-10)

When Sam saw Jesus sitting at the well that day, she didn't know who He was. She could tell by the way He was dressed that He was Jewish and wondered why He was talking to her, a Samaritan. Men didn't talk to women in public places. Sam must have avoided eye contact at first. Did she wonder if He wanted something, like all the other men in her life? He did—but it wasn't what she must have expected.

When He spoke, she heard gentleness in His voice. There was kindness and humility in His simple request for a drink. When she looked into His eyes she saw acceptance, not

judgment; love, not hate. She felt valuable in His presence, as though she had something to offer. There was something different about Him.

He Is There

Jesus could have chosen to be anywhere else that day, but instead He was there pursuing Sam. John tells us in verse 4 that Jesus “*had* to go through Samaria.” Jews considered Samaritans to be the scum of the earth. Usually if they were near Samaria they would travel around it—but not Jesus. He *had* to go through Samaria, because He knew Sam would be there.

Knowing she was running from the very thing that reminded her of her imperfections, Jesus timed it so that she would run into Him and find perfect love. He initiated conversation and asked her for the one thing she had to offer: water. It wasn’t much, but it was a starting point. Sam could have easily filled her jar and headed back home, returning to her busy day. But she stopped and listened.

Jesus met Sam in one of the loneliest parts of her day. In the same way, He is there waiting for us in the midst of our imperfect lives, when our pain and failures confirm our self-doubts. He is there waiting for us when we’re going through the motions, aware of what needs to be done but unaware of how we’re going to do it. He is there on those mornings when we can’t stop criticizing ourselves for blowing it the day before; when we go to work and wonder why we’re even there.

During endless days filled with changing diapers and doing laundry, wondering if we’ll ever find meaning in the monotony of motherhood, He is there. When we come home to an empty house and wonder why we don’t have a family, or come home to a teenager who belittles us and a husband who ignores us, Jesus is there.

If you’ve ever doubted God’s personal pursuit of you, let this truth sink in, my friend: wherever you are, He wants to meet you there. He is waiting for you to stop, come up close, and turn your heart to listen to His. You don’t have to pretend things are fine when they aren’t. He knows what is going on in your thoughts. Nothing could keep Him from wanting to be with you.

He invites you to come to Him to receive the perfect love He offers—love that casts out fear, love that is patient and kind, love that keeps no record of wrongs. That is what He offered Sam, and it’s what He offers you and me.

Will This Make My Life Easier?

Jesus told Sam if she knew who she was talking to, she wouldn’t even bother with the water in the well. Instead, she would ask Him for life-giving water:

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” (John 4:11–15)

Sam didn’t understand the fullness of His promise, so she focused on the first part of Jesus’ sentence, which equated in her mind to “this could make my life easier.” Never thirsting again meant she wouldn’t have to come back to the well every day. Her errands would be shorter and her to-do list cut in half!

Do you ever read God’s promises and fall into the pattern of thinking, “Oh, it would make my life so much easier if God would just do this”? I do. It’s easy to approach God like a magic genie, hoping He’ll grant our wishes. Some days I’ll tell God what I need to get done and minimize my prayers to asking Him to bless my efforts.

Now I’m not implying that God isn’t concerned with our daily needs; He cares about every detail in our lives. But if we only live on the surface with God, we’ll never experience the intimacy we long for or the acceptance and security He offers.

Instead of just making our lives easier, God wants us to come up close and experience Him and all that He has for us. He knows that our problems won’t be solved and our confidence won’t be found through simply getting more stuff done.

Instead, He invites us to slow down and talk to Him about our day and the desires of our hearts, asking Him to show us the reasons for our doubts and insecurities. He wants us to go below the surface by asking Him to show us *why* we want what we want. Then we can ask Him if what we want is really what we need.

Below the Surface

Sam wanted Jesus to change the course of her day, but she needed Him to change the course of her life. Much like the path she wore back and forth to this well each day to draw water, there was a path she wore back and forth to the hearts of men, hoping they could quench her emotional thirst.

Jesus knew Sam, like us, longed to be loved and pursued for who she was—not for what she could do but simply for herself. The only way He could satisfy the thirst of her soul was to help her see it. He could offer her living water, but first she had to want it, ask for it, and then receive it. And so Jesus took their conversation below the surface:

He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

“I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” (John 4:16–18)

Can you imagine Sam’s pain? I feel the emptiness in her confession: “I have no husband.” It must have been so hard to say those words, knowing she had had five husbands, and then to

discover this man already knew so much about her. She had been rejected and abandoned five times.

Sam was uncomfortable and didn't want to go below the surface, so she quickly changed the subject.

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."
(John 4:19–20)

Only a prophet could know so much about her, so she asked Him where she should go to church. I wonder if it was her way of saying, "Yes I've had five husbands, and I'm living with someone who won't commit. But it's no big deal, I'm fine." Or was it an attempt to cover her sin with good deeds? Was she saying, "My personal life is in shambles, but I'm a good person. I want to do good things. So tell me, where should I go to church, on this mountain or in Jerusalem?"

Have you ever put on a façade that everything was okay when it wasn't? Have you ever been afraid to let people know who you really are? Wouldn't you love to be in such a safe place that you could stop pretending and be real with God and yourself (and eventually other people) about where you are and how you got there?

Jesus asked Sam these questions so she would see the pattern of her life and what it was doing to her. He took her below the surface and showed her what was really going on in her heart. He helped Sam see that each broken relationship had convinced her she was not worth staying for.

In the same way, Jesus wants to help you see what is going on in your heart and what you are struggling with that is eroding your security and confidence. If you were sitting with Jesus today, what do you think He'd want to talk about? Perhaps your heart needs to be set free from pretending and perfectionism. Are you longing for others' approval and wonder why you can never get enough?

Maybe you have experienced the pain of divorce or the devastation of a broken engagement. Have you found yourself in a cycle of unhealthy and destructive relationships and don't know why? Maybe insecurity or infidelity has caused you to doubt that someone better will ever come along. Maybe you don't even know what you're struggling with, and that is okay. Jesus does.

So many times we go through the motions, doing the same things over and over again, hoping something will change. Few of us realize that this repetition is the definition of insanity. Let's not look back and wish we'd done things differently. Let's go beneath the surface with Jesus so He can show us places in our hearts that need His repair.

To Be Known Is to Be Loved

Jesus knew Sam's story and He knows yours. The Greek word for "know" is *yada*. It means a deep emotional experience; a bonding between two people when one truly feels the emotions of the other. Jesus knows your pain, fears, doubts, and disappointments. He understands your dreams and desires.

Although some of us feel uncomfortable that God knows so much about us, it is good to be known, to be listened to and not judged. Jesus is the only One who can meet our deepest needs to be accepted and delighted in simply because of who we are. We can offer nothing but our presence, and He will desire us just the same.

Remember when Jesus told Sam that living water would become a spring in her, welling up to *eternal life*? I used to just skim over the words "eternal life" because they sounded so religious. I knew it meant Sam would get to be with Jesus for eternity, but I didn't see how that impacted my everyday life. One day God, however, showed me why "eternal life" was such a crucial part of God's promise to Sam and to us. In John 17:3, Jesus said, "This is eternal life: that they *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (emphasis added).

By offering Sam eternal life, Jesus was offering her the gift of His Holy Spirit, who would cleanse her sins. But even more than that, it would lead her into a relationship where she could *know* the one true God and be known by Him.

Why is that significant? Because Christianity is the only faith that offers a relationship with the living God. We don't just know *about* our God; our God wants us to *know* Him. We were created for that kind of relationship. He wants us to find lasting soul-security in knowing we are valued and pursued by the One who knows and loves us—the One who created our inmost being and wove us together in our mother's womb (Ps. 139:13). Have you let the gospel of God's grace move from your head to your heart, so that you know without a doubt you are known intimately and loved completely by God?

Our Image of God

I didn't grow up knowing about God's love. I didn't really know God for who He is, and I had no idea He wanted a personal relationship with me. Oftentimes our image of God is shaped by early childhood memories and perceptions, good and bad .

When I was a kid, I perceived God as distant, unavailable, and unapproachable. My image of Him conjured up feelings of fear and judgment instead of protection and acceptance. I wanted to please Him so He wouldn't get mad at me. I pictured Him on the sidelines of life, keeping score, and I felt like I was always disappointing Him. In a nutshell, I had created God in the image of my father.

My dad showed love by buying me things. So, if God brought good things in my life, I felt His approval. My dad showed disappointment through withdrawal and anger. When life was

hard and I was lonely, I wondered what I had done wrong and if God was turning His back on me.

When I was twelve years old, my mom remarried and we moved to a small town in North Carolina. When you live in the Bible Belt, going to church every Sunday is like going to the swimming pool on hot summer days. It's just what you do, so I did.

That is when I started hearing about God's grace, love, and forgiveness. I heard how Jesus died for our sins and wants a relationship with us. Over time I came to know God for who He is through the person of Jesus Christ, who is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb. 1:3).

I discovered that God was not created in my father's image, but that as God's child I was created in His image instead. I was made to know Him and be known by Him—and so are you. Are there images of God in your heart that need to be replaced, repaired, or restored?

More Than Knowing

A personal relationship with God sets us free to be all we were created to be. As children of God we were designed to find our identity, our significance, and our confidence in Him. When we respond to God's invitation and accept Jesus' gift of salvation, we don't just accept a new philosophy of life. We establish a personal relationship with our Creator, the One who knows us and accepts us fully, but who also desires our transformation so we can become all He created us to be.

Remember back to the day I was painting our house? As I stood on the ladder, I thought about how badly the repairs were needed after all. I was no longer mad that someone in our neighborhood had come up close and gotten very personal. Instead, I was glad they cared enough to notice and tell us.

So it is with Jesus. He notices and cares enough to tell us that our hearts need repair. He won't leave a warning on our front door, but He did leave Himself as a love letter nailed to the cross of Calvary, declaring the depth of His perfect love. Through His death and resurrection, we are offered the gift of new life through the Holy Spirit and lasting security through our relationship with Christ.

The only way we'll have a confident heart is if we move beyond knowing about God to knowing and relying on Him—to depending on His Word with our whole heart, mind, and soul. Maybe you are like me; you have believed in Him for years—but you haven't really *believed* Him completely. At least you don't always feel or live like His promises are true for you. Maybe you know God loves you and forgives you, but you still beat yourself up for mistakes you've made and the ways you think you've let Him and others down.

Today can be the day the gospel of grace moves from your head to your heart. Today can be the day you take your first steps out of the shadows of doubt and start really living in the truth.

Will you let your desire to be known and loved just as you are lead you into a more personal and intimate relationship with Jesus? The first step is to embrace your imperfections in the light of God's perfect love, "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

I also know it's possible that you are in a different place. A new place. An unknown place. Like Sam, maybe you know about God but you don't personally know God. I am so glad you have made it to this point and that you are taking this journey with me. I can only imagine how God is smiling now. I know how much He wants to give you His grace and truth. He's also inviting you into an up close and personal relationship through Jesus so that you can know Him, be set free through His forgiveness, and experience the fullness of His love.

If you would like to accept Jesus as Lord of your life, you can pray the following prayer or use it as a guide to create your own. Just talk to God from your heart, with honesty and sincerity.

Lord, I am sorry that I have done things to separate myself from You and other people. I confess I have sinned against You and ask You to forgive me. I acknowledge that I could never earn salvation by my good works, but I come to You and put my trust in what Jesus did for me on the cross. I believe You love me and that Jesus died and rose again so that I can be forgiven and come to know You. Come into my heart and be Lord of my life. I trust You and thank You for loving me so much that I can know You up close and personal here on earth, and spend the rest of eternity with You in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Sweet friend, wherever you are, Jesus meets you there. You and I are not worthy of His love and we can never do anything to deserve it—but we are worth His love because He chose to give it to us. We are His! Hold on to this promise and live in the power of its truth: because God's love is perfect, you don't have to be!

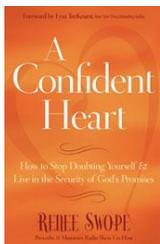
Praying God's Promises

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, give me the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that I may know Him better. I want to know and rely on the love You have for me, Jesus, and live in that love. You say that whoever lives in love lives in You, and You in him. In this way, love is made complete in me, so that I can have confidence today and forever. I want an up close and personal relationship with You, one where I don't have to pretend or hide.

When I feel insecure, insignificant, or unloved, remind me of Your perfect love that has the power to cast out my fear. Thank You for Your love that is patient, is kind, and keeps no record of my wrongs. I trust that because Your love is perfect, I don't have to be. I will remain in Your love and be confident of this: that He who began a good work in me will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen. [See Ephesians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3; 1 John 4:16–18; 1 Corinthians 13:4–5; John 15:9; Philippians 1:6.]

Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. Think back to your childhood and your first memory of God. Describe your image of Him growing up.
2. How does your childhood perception of God compare to what you see in Christ through His interaction with Sam? List the similarities and differences.
3. Do you ever feel like you are the only one who struggles with insecurity or doubt? Why or why not?
4. Jesus wants to create a safe place for you to be transparent with Him where you can ask questions and be real about your desires, doubts, disappointments, and dreams. He knows you and wants you to really know Him. Is the thought of this kind of relationship with God comforting or uncomfortable, and why?
5. Has anything ever happened that caused you to distance yourself from God or other people? How does it make you feel to know Jesus understands, and He is still there with you in every moment of every day? When do you need His assurance and presence most?
6. Reread Sam's story in John 4, asking Jesus to meet you there and show you things in your heart that need His repair. Is there part of my story or Sam's story that you relate to most?
7. What lesson from this chapter will you walk away with and hold on to so that you can live in the security of God's approval and acceptance?



This chapter is taken from Renee Swope's new book *A Confident Heart*. [Purchase your copy today!](#) Renee Swope's passion is to lead women to live confidently in Christ by showing them how to *rely on* and *live in* the power of God's promises in their everyday lives. For more information, about Renee and her ministry visit www.ReneeSwope.com.

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ⁱ Eldredge, John and Brent Curtis. *The Sacred Romance* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 83.