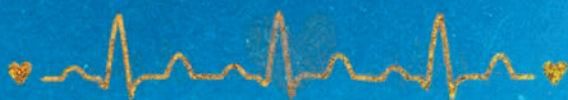


my
heart



EVERY BEAT
SURRENDERED
TO OUR
UNCHANGING GOD

JULIE MANNING

my heart



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JULIE MANNING



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Foreword

My physical heart works just fine as far as I know, but my emotional heart—my soul—is a little more touch and go.

Over the course of my life I've been blessed to have many friends who bring different, valuable, and needed gifts to my life. Some who make me laugh till I cry and some who help me know what “not to wear.” Some who are present when something tragic hits our lives and you don't know what to do and some who help me parent better. Then there is Julie Manning. Julie gets an entire category. She brings transcendence to my life that causes me to ache for heaven and live less afraid of the worst that may hit me on Earth.

The last few years have brought some difficulties for my family and me. And as is common, in the valleys of our lives, with the sun barely peeking over the mountain crests far above, you start to doubt Jesus, you start to wonder if He sees you, if He has forgotten you, if He is good?

Julie has walked through those valleys right beside me. Despite her own brushes with death and other unique circumstances, she's walked right beside me and continually whispered in my ear, “Yes, Jesus sees you, no He has not forgotten you, yes He is good.” And when someone who lives with the ever-present realization that life could end at

any given moment speaks those words, they mean an awful lot. Cliché trite statements aren't possible when you know the fragility of life here, the way that Julie does.

There is another gift Julie gives me and will give you too. She knows down to her marrow that sheer presence with Jesus is better . . .

Jesus is better than any acquisition on Earth.

Jesus is better than any relationship here.

Jesus is better than any dream coming true.

You'd think the way I am describing her, she might live somber or serious all the time. But if you are blessed to meet Julie in real life, you'll see her curls bouncing as she talks about Jesus, her eyes all lit up, her voice joyful and nearly child-like and full of wonder, full of hope, full of excitement for whatever lay ahead both here and in our home to come.

Julie tells me all the time that I can't cry at her funeral; I have to celebrate because she will be celebrating. And I tell her all the time that she can't go first because she is who I want by my bed if I find myself sick and dying.

So as we race toward heaven together, it brings me the greatest pleasure in the world to introduce you to my daily "life" running friend, Julie Manning.

Her story will change you.

Her joy will amaze you.

And I pray her faith will unleash upon your life as you run beside her for a little while in these pages.

—Jennie Allen, founder of IF:Gathering

Opening Letter to Readers

I do not believe that I am the only woman whose mind wrestles with her soul. I believe others of you also fight against the angst of pride, comfort, control, comparison, and the feeling that your life is insignificant. Only the Lord knows that this book would not have been written had His Holy Spirit not intervened and created such a strong conviction that my introvert self could not ignore. The Lord took this little girl who would much rather be a fly on the wall and sat my busy-bee hiney down in a chair long enough to bare my soul in front of a computer screen. The result of that time is the book you now hold in your hands.

Were there moments of doubt? Absolutely. In fact, I battled through great mountains of doubt, fear, and insecurity. Yet spending time soaking up the Word of God, worshipping Him in song, and praying my heart out would ground my soul in obedience. I have learned much through this process. Possibly the greatest lesson for me has been learning that joy abides through obedience; joy can be experienced even in the hard obedience, calling for something so scary and so vulnerable. I have spent many days bowing my head and asking for increasing faith. I am not a writer by trade. Yet the Lord opened my heart just

enough to pen some words and thoughts down on paper. Elisabeth Elliot once said, “Don’t dig up with doubt what was planted with faith.” Elisabeth, thank you for being brave enough, allowing these words to leave your mouth and land upon my heart decades after they were spoken. Your life and your obedience have been an encouragement in faith to more women than you will ever know. Lord, would You use the following pages to be just a fraction of encouragement to other women in this day and age.

*Joy abides
through
obedience.*

Through writing, the Lord has helped me realize some things. Today I was reminded that there is purpose in me sharing my story beyond merely allowing my three

boys to know their mommy and the amazing nearness of our miraculous God. By sharing with others the moment where I stared Jesus in the face, I allow my eyes to see God move and watch His hand at work. I also allow my mind and heart to remember what He has done and, thus, fan the flame of faith and hope in my forever home with God.

Another realization I’ve had through the process of writing is that God’s pursuit of my soul has not ended and truthfully will never end. He desires all of me—all of my worship, all of my affection. He is showing me that He is worth more than anything this life can offer—more than the trivial, to the things I somehow value most.

I want you to know this is not just my story. It can be your story, too. It can be a means through which, I pray, you see how Jesus is pursuing after your soul, your worship, and your full affections. And, in return, may He

give you the courage to live with vulnerability, urgency, and intentionality as you share your own story . . . your own heart.

Lord, You alone are the God who was, who is, and who is to come. You are unchanging, and Your pursuit after Your children is unending. I ask that You will draw near to every single person that reads the words on these pages. No matter what season of life—whether in the valley, the desert, the mountaintop, or the plateau. I pray that You will show up in their lives with power, with compassion, with love, and with conviction. I pray You will show Yourself worthy of their every affection. I pray that You meet their every need. And I pray You will turn each heart toward worship of the One who gave His all for our behalf. Jesus, give Your children perseverance until the day when our faith becomes sight.

my heart, julie

Chapter 1

A New Beginning



*“For the word of the LORD is right,
and all His work is trustworthy.”*

PSALM 33:4

The rising sun burned brightly that Monday morning. Noah enthusiastically and proudly climbed up into the stroller as I loaded his snack, sippy cup, and a handful of his favorite books to be within reach.

“You ready, buddy?” I asked.

“Yes!” Noah shouted with a grin, and we headed out for our morning walk. It would be our last stroller ride, just the two of us. Noah’s life was about to be rocked. Who am I kidding? My life was about to be rocked. Noah’s little brother, Hunter, would be born the next morning. Life always seems clearer in hindsight, but for now, as Noah and I hooked a right and climbed the steep hill to exit our

street, we simply enjoyed another read through *Green Eggs and Ham*.

At the ripe age of twenty months, Noah had grown comfortable talking about “Baby Brother” as he grew in my belly. Yet the thought of “Baby Brother” actually being born produced a scowl on the toddler’s face, almost as if Noah was saying, “Why? Why? Why would we open up a can of worms and let the little guy out?” If only I could share with him the amount of belly-hurting laughter his younger brother would produce in his life. If only I could make a twenty-month-old realize he was about to meet his best friend. If only I could share with him how much his little brother would look up to him and esteem him. If only I could share that the two of them would be inseparable. But for now all I could tell Noah was, “Don’t worry, Buddy, I won’t let Brother eat your goldfish . . . at least, not for a while.”

Sometimes I feel like that twenty-month-old with limited perspective. Looking back, I wish the Lord could have sat me down to tell me all the beautiful things that would bloom through the season I was about to enter. If only I could have seen how He would endure me, breathe life into me, and win my affections, then maybe, just maybe, the next few months and even years would not have been so terrifying as I battled fears and unknowns.



The alarm clock began abruptly buzzing at 5:00 a.m. I had been awake since 4:30, mostly with the anticipation of finally getting to meet the little fighter that had been kicking my rib

cage and bladder for the last nine months. As I rolled over to awaken my man, who did not even flinch with the sounding alarm, I gave him a kiss on the cheek and loudly said, “Come on, Baby, it’s Go Time!” Yet, in his steadfast and unshaken manner, John somehow convinced me to lie in his arms for five more minutes. And then . . . he quietly started to pray. John prayed for our day, the birth of our son, for Noah, for me, for us. It was just what this anxious mommy needed. I needed to sit still and feel the presence of Jesus.

My mother had graciously come into town the night before to keep Noah. Before tiptoeing out of the house to make the drive to the hospital, John and I snuck into Noah’s room. We kissed his sweet little head, and I whispered in his ear, “You are going to meet Hunter today. He loves you already. Mommy loves you. I’ll see you soon.”

As John and I drove to the hospital, the darkness of the sky was transitioning to a beautiful mix of orange, pink, and red as the sun began to peek itself over the horizon. Hand in hand, we sat in peaceful silence as we watched the beauty of the sunrise. As we were pulling up next to Rudy’s BBQ store and gas station, our eyes met, and John gave me one of his smirky little smiles. “No!” I said with a flirtatious hint, “You may not stop to get a breakfast taco, John Manning! We have a baby to meet!” John responded in the most serious of tones, “But that didn’t stop me when Noah was born.” It is true.

On the morning of Noah’s birth, we just “happened” to need gas in the car. John conveniently pulled into Rudy’s for gas *and* two breakfast tacos. I still chuckle as I recall the expression on the woman’s face at the hospital registration desk as she observed this husband chowing down on his

breakfast as he led his laboring wife into the hospital. With a huge grin on his face, he said, “Well, there’s no reason why both of us have to go hungry this morning.” I shook my head and flirtatiously rolled my eyes, as I laughed at this opening comment. John Manning, my comedian!

However, on this particular morning, John would have to skip the Rudy’s taco tradition for no other reason than the kitchen had not yet opened for the day. John loves messing with me, and he thinks it is superhilarious. Key word here is “he” (wink!). Truth be told, I think it’s funny too . . . most of the time. I am incredibly thankful for my husband. Not only does he lead our family well, but he makes us all laugh as he leads.

As John and I arrived at the hospital, we followed the arrows affixed to the cream-colored walls with the hope that one of the arrows would land us at the labor and delivery unit. When we began to see canvas prints of infant faces hanging decoratively throughout one particular hallway, we knew we were in the right place. We introduced ourselves to the women behind the registration desk, and as soon as our names exited our mouths, we were whisked away to the preoperative area. I double-checked the clock on the wall and thought, *We aren’t late, are we?*

Hunter, like Noah, would be born via a planned cesarean section. I was provided a hospital gown and a pair of those way-too-big hospital socks with the nonslip grippers on both sides. Then the nurse motioned in the direction of the bathroom and said, “Go ahead and empty your bladder while you are in there changing, Honey.” I barely had enough time to find a comfortable position on the hospital bed when I heard my ob-gyn’s voice as he entered the room.

In typical jovial fashion my physician greeted us with a smile from ear to ear. I will never know where his boisterous enthusiasm comes from at 6:30 in the morning. However, his energy, excitement, and confidence made us that much more eager to see little Hunter's face for the first time.

To say my first birthing experience didn't happen as I hoped would be an understatement. I wanted to birth Noah without the use of pain medication. However, that little stinker decided to lodge both his head and his ankles under my right rib cage for the last three months of my pregnancy. This bought me a sterile, draped abdominal surgery to get him out. I would be lying if I didn't say I was disappointed that I didn't experience full labor. I felt like I had missed my "rite of passage" as a mother. But, at the end of the day, I was just so incredibly thankful to have safely delivered a healthy baby boy. I love how, even in the growing of Noah, the Creator of life knew best to arrange Noah's tiny body in a breech position. Even then the Lord knew what would be in store during Hunter's birth. On this early morning in July, He knew it would be best if I was surrounded by an anesthesiologist and hooked up to a cardiac monitor. His Sovereignty, His limitless power to do what He decides to do,¹ over Noah's birth was not mutually exclusive from Hunter's birth. God's sovereignty flows and encompasses all.



It was time. . . .

One of the operating room nurses came to lead me back into the operating room. She would prep me for the

surgery and hold me steady as the long and not-so-skinny needle was inserted into my back to deliver the spinal block, numbing the entire lower part of my body. Although my heart was beating fast and hard, I felt confident in my physician's ability in performing cesarean sections. After all, I had "been there . . . done that." I knew what to expect. I prayed a little prayer on my walk into the OR, simply saying, "Lord, thank You. Thank You for my boys. Thank You for life. I don't deserve this." I was overcome with gratefulness for the blessings of my marriage and our growing family.

Once all of the drapes were hung and my belly had been scrubbed sterile, John was escorted into the operating room to stand by my side. He held onto my left hand with such warmth. He made me feel secure and safe. My body was cold, and I could not keep both of my arms from shaking what felt like violently. The anesthesiologist placed a nicely warmed blanket on my chest. As the procedure began, I increasingly experienced a feeling of light-headedness. Everything around me turned from such clarity in all of my five senses to one big fuzzy mess. I heard surrounding voices speaking to one another and even to me, but all the words were undistinguishable. It was as if everyone's voice was in the far distant background. Clearly something was not right.

I remember shifting my head to the right to glance at the cardiac monitor because, after all, when you are a nurse, checking the monitor is second nature. Yes, you heard that correctly. A nurse. An ICU nurse. That initial glance turned into a stare. I had just earned my master's degree in nursing, and I had worked in pediatric cardiology in the

intensive care unit for the preceding six years. So, when I observed that every other to every third heartbeat was an irregular beat, my fuzzy brain became concerned. At the same time I recall a second anesthesiologist urgently entering the operating room. I then saw my heart rhythm go into ventricular tachycardia. For the nonmedical folks reading this, ventricular tachycardia, or VT, is not a good heart rhythm. If uncorrected by medication or electrical shock, it will lead to death. As my eyes rolled to the back of my head and my eyelids slowly shut, I thought, *They might just have to start CPR on me.*

And . . . time . . . stood . . . still.

In that moment, I experienced something that would take me many months to even speak of aloud. The sounds of the operating room dimmed in my ears to almost a silence, and somehow, all I knew was brightness—complete, surrounding, and all-encompassing brightness. All I knew was a surreal, overpowering peace. All I knew was that I could feel the blood vessels dilate in my body all the way down to my toes. Warmth overcame my entire chilled body. Why was this strange? Because I was medically paralyzed and numb from the waist down for the surgery. I should not have been able to sense anything in my lower body. But I could almost move my toes. The calming peace I experienced cannot be described with words. Truly, there is no way for me to articulate any of this awe-filled, all-consuming peace. In my heart, I believe the Lord covered me with His presence in that very moment. And His presence alone was better than anything this world has to offer. Including my beloved husband. Including my precious little Hunter I had yet to even lay

eyes on. Including the precious twenty-month-old who had won my heart and was presently sleeping peacefully miles away in his crib at home.

I do not know how much time passed before I heard the cries of my son, Hunter. I have no memory of my doctor lifting Hunter's freshly born body up in the air for me to see over the drapes that were hung near my chest. I have no idea how long the anesthesiologist tugged on my shoulder to get me to open my eyes. What I do know is that I did not want my eyes to open. I did not want to leave this peace. I did not want to leave the brightness.

The medical team did not need to resuscitate me or perform CPR on me the morning of Hunter's birth. On this particular morning my heart spontaneously reset itself; however, I no doubt created more-than-a-little scare for my ob-gyn. Throughout both of my pregnancies, he teased me that if something was going to go wrong, it seemed that those incidents happened most frequently with other medical professionals. Well, Doc, you were right about that one! But in reality this was the beginning of God's intense pursuit of my soul. None of the events from that July 14, 2009, morning or the many other events over the next few years were one bit outside the Lord's hands or His control.



I often wonder about what happened during that time of complete brightness. Many ask, "Did you experience heaven?" The answer is no. I did not see Jesus face-to-face. I did not see angels. However, I do believe that just because

I did not see our God face-to-face does not mean I did not experience Him. I experienced a peace that was more important to me than saying good-bye to my husband, who happens to be the love of my life and my best friend. I experienced a peace that was more desirable than laying eyes on the precious little boy that was just brought into the world or going home to my sweet Noah. So, although I did not experience heaven, I did experience the One who dwells in heaven. The presence and peace of Jesus were better than my greatest joys on this earth. This feeling was enough; in fact, it was more than enough! His presence birthed an unquenchable longing within the core of my being for my eternal home!

So it may not surprise you that when people ask me to pray over them, I am quick to ask for the Lord's nearness and the Lord's presence. We do not need to die in order to experience Jesus; we just need to stop, pause, and cease striving long enough to need Him, love Him, and rest in Him. God's Word states in

Psalm 145:18, "The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth" (NASB). His nearness and His presence can truly bring an incomprehensible and unexplainable peace in the moments of our greatest sufferings, as well as in the mundane tasks of our waking hours. I simply desire for others to experience Jesus as I did on July 14, 2009, and like I continue to experience Him even in the commonplace, unexciting tasks from day to day, and from hour to hour.

*His presence birthed
an unquenchable
longing within the core
of my being for my
eternal home!*

My precious boys,

You are so young and full of energy and life as I write this to you. If the Lord wills, you will have many decades of life to live in front of you. I want you to know that although you may believe that you are self-sufficient, I pray your hearts, minds, and souls will see your need for complete dependence on Jesus. Sometimes the Lord uses the hard things of life to reveal to us our need for Jesus. And this is a blessing . . . that we will be aware of our true need for the Lord. My prayer is that the Lord will birth in you a zealous desire for His Word. I pray that reading through the Bible will remind you of God's promises and remind you of His nearness over your life. Each one of you will come face-to-face with hard and, dare I even say, devastating circumstances throughout your life. I pray that in those moments you will ask . . . no . . . that you will BEG Jesus to be near so that you can sense His presence with you.

When your mind and heart and thoughts and soul are consumed with the Truth of Scripture, Jesus truly pours out over us what is written in Philippians 4:7, "The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (NIV). His consuming peace and presence allow us to authentically say to whatever circumstance we face, "It is well with my soul." We can say, "It is well with my soul," not because we agree with the circumstance, not because we believe the suffering is fair and just (for more times than not, we will think the complete opposite). But our

soul, our mind, and our heart can experience and embrace His peace because Jesus is the Rock upon which we stand . . . or fall upon, or barely hang onto. Jesus is enough. Shouting His name to the heavens when all is wrong and broken will reveal one's authentic surrender to Him. And, in our surrender to Jesus, He will respond with the grace of His presence and peace. Scripture states in 2 Thessalonians 3:16, "Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance" (NASB).

So in this moment I am praying for Jesus to remind you that He loves you and desires for you to call out His name, the name above all names, when you are hurting. Yet not just in your hurting but also in seasons of joy and abundance; for all blessings flow from above, the Giver of life. Boys, may you persevere through this life with not just an occasional need for Jesus but a daily desperation for Jesus.

I love you . . . my heart, mommy