

GOD *with*
THE SINGLE
MOTHER

the UNSEEN
COMPANION

MICHELLE LYNN SENTERS

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PART ONE

the
LONGING
for HOME






As I write, I can't help but wonder where you are. Perhaps you are standing in a bookstore, thumbing through this chapter and wondering if this book is for you. Maybe you found a few moments to read during your lunch break at work. But most likely, you are at home. Your children are in bed and you've finally settled down in your favorite chair for a little time to yourself. You are all warm. Safe and sound. This is where I imagine you.

May I ask you a personal question? When you are at your house, do you feel *at home*? In other words, in your quietest moments, do you feel content and secure with who and where you are in this world? When you come home from work each day, do you breathe in a sigh of relief, knowing you are where you belong? Or are you still waiting for an arrival of some sort? If you are like me, the concept of "feeling at home" seems elusive and somewhat dreamy—almost as if I have something yet to attain or find or create. While I find some sense of comfort and identity in my rented house, my heart desires something more.

Woven within the fabric of our being is a God-given longing for home. We yearn not only for a bit of land, four walls, and a roof—but *a home*. A place of refuge, safety, love, and belonging. Permanence and peace.

I remember myself as a child, scouring the neighborhood alleys, dumpsters, and fields for broken and discarded pieces of plywood and two-by-fours. I collected as much as my skinny arms could carry home. Then, equipped with a large rock and a coffee can filled with rusty nails, I began to hammer. I was a



builder of forts. Wooden forts. Snow forts. Inside-the-house, blanket forts. With unrelenting determination, I built little homes for myself—personal shelters against the storms of childhood, namely my annoying little brother and sister. And once inside, I dreamed about a life of *my* choosing.

But in all those years of building and dreaming, I never envisioned *this* life. A life scattered across six states, fourteen cities, and thirty-three houses. A life stained by emotional abuse, addiction, stalking, and divorce. At thirty-two years old, I found myself standing in a desert wasteland, desperately longing for a *home*. With my young daughters clinging to the hem of my skirt, I picked up that old rock and can of rusty nails to build once again from what was broken and discarded.

Remnants of shattered dreams.

Fractured plans. Misplaced hope.

Pounded together with inadequate strength.

And that is where *He* answered my cry.

Jesus took the rock and nails from my hands and reminded me that He was a *Carpenter*.

With a steady hand and certain eyes, He lifted my family out of ruins and placed us on a firm foundation. He built a strong frame and surrounded us with protective walls. He placed a secure roof over our heads and adorned our new home with things of beauty.

Of *this* home and Builder, I write.

Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain.

PSALM 127:1



CHAPTER 1

A BROKEN TENT

My tent is destroyed; all its ropes are snapped.

JEREMIAH 10:20

I felt tempted to yell out in frustration. Scream. Indulge myself in a well-deserved, single-momma, losing-it moment. Instead, I uttered a familiar prayer as I struck the mallet against the tent stake. “*God, where ARE you in this? Why won’t you help me?*” The ground beneath, composed of broken granite and hardened dirt, refused to give way. It was my first camping trip as a single mother, and I was failing within the first twenty minutes.

My failure was not for lack of planning. Having grown up in the Wyoming mountains, I considered myself a seasoned camper. I saved for months and purchased the needed supplies. Tent. Sleeping bags. Lantern. First aid kit. Abundant “just-in-case” items. Propane stove. A campfire menu that could rival that of a five-star restaurant and peanut butter in a tube, in the event the girls didn’t enjoy my outdoor culinary stylings. Neighboring campers likely assumed we intended to stay the entire summer as they watched us unload the car.

Too proud to ask for help, I continued to pound the stubborn earth with all the self-sufficient, bold-determination I could muster. I grunted and huffed. Muttered and grimaced. I may have cussed and cried a few tears, but the dry wind swept them away before anyone noticed. Forty minutes, five bent tent stakes, and three bloodied knuckles later, the tent was up, and we were finally ready for our camping adventure.

I stepped back and admired my work. The tent stood strong, and the girls raced inside with sleeping bags and pillows to claim their territory. But just as every grand adventure requires not one, but many obstacles to overcome, we were just beginning.

The rocky campsite, booked online, was situated near a busy mountain road, popular with both tourists and truckers, whose down-shifting diesel engines echoed mercilessly against the canyon walls.

Our faithful German shepherd protected us with fits of barking, lunging, and pouncing. Squirrels. Cars. People. Ladybugs clinging to milkweed. Leaves blowing in the wind. Each threat received the proper attention and decibel level it undoubtedly deserved.

The lakeshore swimming beach didn't allow pets, forcing us to carry our picnic lunch and armfuls of "just-in-case" supplies along the rocky shoreline until we reached a dog-friendly, but not-so-swimmable, area to spend the afternoon.

And once we returned to camp, the wind grew stronger, carrying more pollen than my thirteen-year-old daughter, Rachel, could withstand. She then succumbed to a three-hour nap after I inadvertently gave her too much allergy medicine.

Yes. It was a humbling kind of adventure.

Thankfully, the wind died down long enough for this

camera-toting momma to build a campfire and snap a few pictures of the girls roasting marshmallows. I watched them laugh and dance as the sun set in blazing glory behind the mountains and realized they were oblivious to my struggle. They created joyful memories despite my perceived failings and invited me to join the celebration. Gabrielle offered the gift of a s'more, with charred marshmallow and chocolate dripping between her six-year-old fingers, and for one blessed moment, my worries and failures melted into sweet goodness and little-girl giggles.

I went to bed with a full heart that evening, understanding the importance of what I accomplished. The girls snuggled deep within their sleeping bags, their eyes heavy from swimming and campfire smoke. Our dog settled down, her breathing slow and restful. All was quiet and good, except for the wind. And traffic. And neighboring campers, but I didn't mind. I prevailed despite the circumstances and, somehow, that gave me assurance that I could tackle this single-momma thing. If I could muscle tent stakes into rocky ground, perhaps I could attempt grander things. *Maybe I could save enough money to buy a little camping trailer. We could fix it up retro style and visit all the national parks . . .*

I fell asleep feeling courageous and self-reliant, unaware of the increasing wind and impending storm.

*"The rain came down, the streams rose,
and the winds blew and beat against that house,
and it fell with a great crash."*

MATTHEW 7:27

The sun burned hot against the tent the next morning, and before I opened my eyes, I lingered in dreams of howling wind

and breaking branches. The sound of a speedboat in the distance startled me awake and into the awareness that I had not been dreaming. While we slept through the night, the wind broke our tent, snapping several poles in two and collapsing a wall on one side. The girls woke up disoriented and upset, tearfully assuming it was time to pack up and go home.

But I, both creative and stubborn, refused to disappoint my daughters. As I cooked them pancakes and bacon over the camp stove, I remembered the ingenuity of my fort-making days and made a mental list of repair supplies. Duct tape. Knife. Long sticks for support. *Tree branches, perhaps?* Rope. *This could work. It had to.*

While I gathered supplies, a fellow single mother arrived with her daughter, as planned months earlier. We surveyed the damage together and realized it was much worse than originally thought. The morning wind blew the rain cover away, and the tent was almost entirely collapsed now. My friend forced a smile and indulged me a few moments of shameless naïveté and unabashed optimism as I informed her of my repair plans.

“Michelle,” she began.

That’s all it took. I looked away, feeling the familiar sense of failure rise in my throat.

“It’s over,” she said. “You can’t fix this. Sometimes it’s okay to give up.”

You don’t understand. We need this. I need this, I protested in silence, staring at the insurmountable mountain before me and desperately wanting to move it by sheer force of will.

My friend took my hand in hers. “It’s time for you to go home.”

And while our girls played safely in the distance, I had that well-deserved, single-momma, losing-it moment beside

my dear friend. We both knew I would return to a home just as broken as my tent.

A SEASON OF LIST-MAKING

I left the campground that afternoon with one goal in mind. I intended to fix everything broken in our life, starting with that pathetic tent. The next morning, a grinning salesman at the sporting goods store listened as I voiced my complaint. He winked at the girls and agreed that a single mom and her children should have a safe and reliable tent for their camping adventures. I couldn't tell if he found amusement in our camping disaster or if he felt genuine concern, but we walked out of the store with a new tent, guaranteed to shelter us from the fiercest of Colorado winds. No extra charge.

~~1. Return broken tent.~~ *Done.*

And that marked the beginning of my list-making season. I wrote down every failure, every frustration, every task I need to accomplish to "fix" our broken home.

2. Clean the house and keep it clean.

3. Decorate. Make this rental a *home*.

4. Play with the girls more often. Have fun. Go on adventures and vacations.

5. Create chore lists, discipline plans, and homework schedules that work.

6. Deal with finances.

7. Hire attorney to pursue child support. (*Make more money so I can afford an attorney.*)

8. Go back to college.

9. Exercise. Eat right. Lose weight.

10. Pursue emotional healing for the girls and me. Go to a counselor.
11. Go back to church.
12. Find a husband to love us and complete our family.

Empowered by my “to-do” list, complete with the perceived “I’ve arrived” goal of getting married, I picked up that old rock and can of rusty nails and attempted to build a new life and home for my daughters. Over the next several years, I carefully budgeted my teaching salary. I read self-help books and cleaned out my closets. I took out student loans and returned to school during the weekends, eventually earning a master’s degree in education. I set healthy boundaries and household rules. I mowed the lawn, pulled weeds, and planted flowers. I went on bad dates. Terrible dates. *What was I thinking? Is he seriously snoring through the movie?* kind of dates.

Now, it might seem as if I was quite productive in crossing items off my list, and perhaps you’ve attempted to rebuild your home with the same tenacity. If so, you probably felt like I did. For every brick I laid, another three fell. I simply couldn’t build a home that could stand.

Friends offered consoling hugs and well-meaning words of encouragement. “All you need is God.” “Don’t worry; God is with you.” “All things happen for a reason.” “You’re the toughest woman I know.” And my least favorite, “God isn’t going to give you anything you can’t handle.”

Oh, really? Well, God must think I’m Wonder Woman.

I kept my snarky attitude to myself. My friends spoke with sincerity, and I embraced their concern, but the overused platitudes did little for my single-momma heart. I soon grew skeptical of hope professed by those who lived a life markedly

different from my own. Few understood the grave reality of my situation. I was economically ruined. Sexually vulnerable. Overwhelmed. Lonely. Wounded. Physically and emotionally spent. I needed tangible help, and the world stood before me with arms open wide, offering the practical “solutions” to which any single mother could fall prey: relationships, distractions, lists, and “void fillers.”

“Are you lonely? Join this website. I have men lined up, waiting to meet you.”

“Is life more than you can bear? I have pleasurable distractions to take your mind off things. Grab a glass of wine at 2 a.m. and watch this movie. You will feel much better about yourself.”

“Are you tired? This energy supplement will enable you to climb the highest mountain.”

“Is your life a mess? Follow my easy, fail-proof, ten-step plan to a better life. Only \$39.95, if you call in the next ten minutes.”

And so, with a “to-do” list clutched in my fist, I fell into the arms and empty promises of the world, believing they would eventually provide the home and security I longed for.

*“What they trust in is fragile;
what they rely on is a spider’s web.
They lean on the web, but it gives way;
they cling to it, but it does not hold.”*

JOB 8:14-15

But no matter how many books I read—no matter how many nails I pounded—our ramshackle house continued to fall. The lists lengthened. The debt grew. My loneliness increased, and the girls struggled under the weight of brokenness. While continuing my education was honorable and

set a good example for my daughters, it did not fill my heart's longing. It did not solve any problems or make life as a single mother easier. Nor did relationships, distractions, or a clean house. They may have offered a temporary delight and satisfaction, but eventually they revealed themselves for what they truly were: counterfeit hope and short-lived joy.

Our home was in shambles, and although I didn't realize it at the time, I was faced with two choices. I could either continue building on broken ground, or I could ask God to rebuild my home.

I chose the latter.

*"In that day I will restore David's fallen shelter —
I will repair its broken walls and restore its ruins —
and will rebuild it as it used to be . . ."*

AMOS 9:11



HOMEBUILDING 101: The Longing for Home

A BROKEN TENT

BUILDING YOUR HOME:

Consider the following areas of need for single mothers: balance, companionship, provision, healing, rest, strength, protection, peace, love, and identity.

1. How are you doing in each of these areas? In which areas do you need help or healing?
2. In your areas of greatest need, what temptations and false promises does the world offer you?
3. In which areas do you feel God's presence and blessing?

Review the Scriptures below. Both the prophet Amos and King David emphasized that it is only the Lord who builds a home with strength and sustenance.

*In that day I will restore David's fallen shelter—
I will repair its broken walls and restore its ruins—
and will rebuild it as it used to be . . .*

AMOS 9:11

Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain.

PSALM 127:1

4. Do you define your home as “broken”?
5. How do these Scriptures speak to you as a single mother?
6. In your prayers, speak to God about the “condition” of your home, and ask Him to help you restore the areas of brokenness.

BUILDING A LEGACY OF FAITH:

At the end of each chapter, I will share ideas to help you build a strong and lasting legacy of faith in your children. These easy and practical suggestions will empower you to apply the truths found in each chapter as you parent your children.

PRAY FOR AND WITH YOUR CHILD

After nearly twenty-three years of parenting, I’m still learning the remarkable power that prayer has in the lives of my children. Praying *for* your children will strengthen and support the years of love, discipline, and wisdom you’ve invested because it evokes the hand of God to act on behalf of your family. Prayer is not a last-resort effort if all else fails. It is not second-best. Rather, prayer invites God into your family as the Father and Head of your household. You are no longer alone in your parenting, as prayer acts as a conduit of wisdom and strength between you and God.

In addition, praying *with* your children is one of the most powerful ways you can help your child develop a *relationship* with God.

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

But teaching your child to pray can be an intimidating task if you are uncomfortable or inexperienced with praying aloud. Begin by praying with your child before bed. Your prayer does not need to be long or eloquent. Simply “talk” to God. My daughters and I called these “heartfelt prayers.” After hearing your prayers for a time, ask your children if there is anything they would like to say to God. In time, your children will feel comfortable praying aloud.

If you prefer a format, Jesus modeled the now-beloved “Lord’s Prayer” in Matthew 6:9–13, or you can use the ACTS method of prayer, which includes:

- A**—Adoration (Worship and praise God for who He is. Name His attributes and character.)
- C**—Confession (Confess your sins and ask God for forgiveness.)
- T**—Thanksgiving (Thank God for the blessings of this life.)
- S**—Supplication (Make specific requests of God.)

Example of an ACTS prayer offered by the mother of a school-age child:

Dear God, When I think about the world and all You have created, I am in awe of who You are. Please forgive me for losing my patience today. I was wrong to yell without understanding the whole situation first. Thank You for loving me and forgiving me. Thank You for my family and all You have given us. Please be with us tomorrow as we travel to Grandma’s house. Keep us safe and help us to shine our light, wherever we go. Amen.

Example of an ACTS prayer by a school-age child:

Dear God, You are strong, and You are good. You created the whole world, and You created me. Please forgive me for yelling at my sister. Thank You for loving me and my family. Please help us to be nice to each other. Amen.

For older children who may feel resistant to prayer, begin by telling them on occasion that you are praying for them. In time, share a little about what you are praying for or what God may be telling you. Share a Scripture that you pray over them. Eventually, you may have the opportunity to respond to a situation by asking your child if you can pray over them in that moment. For children who are resistant to prayer, Scripture, or believing in God, it is crucial to ask for God's wisdom on how to proceed. It is very easy for a child to misconstrue genuine prayer as a form of manipulation.

Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.

—PROVERBS 22:6