

CHEERFUL CHRISTIANITY



A CHILD'S
JOURNEY TO
FINDING JESUS

OLIVIA RUTH BARNEY

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GLASS IN THE KITCHEN



She watched as the digital clock on the microwave changed from 4:47 to 4:48 a.m. The change in those small green numbers was brief and disappointing. Nothing was different. Nothing was ever different. She sat in the same quiet house, at the same kitchen table, offering the same unheard prayers to the same unresponsive God.

The Bible in front of her was open, but she wasn't reading it anymore. She was tired of reading about a Savior she didn't know; tired of hearing about miracles that didn't happen anymore. The sky outside was dark and overcast, and it hid both the stars and moon from view. It was too early in the day to be awake, yet too late in the night to go back to sleep. So, she sat there, staring at the glass of water in front of her, wondering why she could never quite fit in even with something as basic as maintaining a normal sleep schedule.

The condensation running down the side of the glass made her throat ache, and she swallowed hard, changing her focus back to the matter at hand with just a bit of effort. It was only a glass of water. Eight ounces of fluid that would make her healthier, stronger, and more capable of recovering. She was home. She was safe. There was absolutely no reason to be afraid.

Her stomach protested loudly, breaking the stillness around her and briefly waking the German shepherd who lay ever vigilant at her feet. Another growl from her stomach filled the air before it was silent once again. She hadn't eaten in almost seventy-two hours, but that wasn't abnormal anymore. The hollow feeling in her stomach, while unpleasant, had become familiar because it was still a preferable alternative to the other things she could be feeling.

She inhaled sharply and quickly put the glass of water to her lips before she could change her mind. Cool relief coated her tongue and soothed her dry throat. She swallowed back an involuntary whimper as she finished the last of her drink. An immediate longing for more settled inside her chest.

She didn't have an eating disorder, despite the things her classmates often whispered in the halls. She wasn't punishing herself for a standard of beauty that she couldn't attain.

And she wasn't seeking attention the way her middle school teachers seemed to believe. On the contrary, nothing had made her feel more invisible or less understood.

But she didn't feel angry at them for the accusations they threw at her, primarily because it wasn't logical to be angry. She knew they didn't understand. They *couldn't* understand. Nobody expected a thirteen-year-old girl to sit alone and awake in the middle of the night, praying to a God for answers that didn't exist and for a body that didn't fail quite so often.

She avoided eating because food, all food, shut her body down. There was no pattern to the chaos, no consistency in her triggers. Her stomach was a ticking time bomb that sent shock waves of pain throughout every nerve in her body. Yes, the initial attack began within her gut, but it never stopped there. Instead, it spread, fast as wildfire in a season of drought, until even her fingertips shook from the effects.

She glanced at the clock again, its green numbers showing that ten minutes had passed. Warm hope filled her chest, and she moved to refill her glass with more of the divine liquid. She had never expected that the water from her tap would come to taste so ambrosial.

But the change occurred almost instantly.

One second, she was at the sink, allowing a small smile of relief to lift her cheeks, and the next she was on the ground, her body curled tightly into the fetal position, shards of glass littering the surrounding tile. A small puddle of water caused them to shine iridescently.

The beginnings of a scream rose in her throat, and she quickly covered her mouth to muffle the sound. Her dog was fully awake and alert now, hovering amid the glass and confusion with worry apparent in her movements. The water she'd swallowed only minutes before threatened to come back up, and she fought desperately to avoid vomiting. She had to keep something down. She was *determined* to keep it down.

Tears stained her cheeks and salted her lips, adding savor and substance to her appeal. She was praying to God again, begging for grace the same way she had each day for the last two years. He was ignoring her again, staying silent like He always did.

Sometimes she hated Him.

When she finally opened her eyes, they felt dry, and she wondered when the tears had stopped flowing. Her dog was watching her cautiously now, whimpering quietly in concerned question. The clock read 6:15 a.m. She should be getting ready for school.

A distant bedroom door opened, and she forced herself into motion before the rest of her family found her catatonic on the kitchen floor. She picked up the broken pieces of glass and used a small towel to absorb the remaining water. Moving to the bathroom, she splashed cool water on her face, removing all traces of tears from her cheeks.

She gazed at her reflection in the mirror and saw the defeated girl that stared back at her. Dark circles of exhaustion settled beneath panicked eyes, and her lips were cracked from dehydration. She had never loathed a child's face before, but she despised her own. So, with a steady breath, she forced herself to smile until her eyes looked a little less hollow and cold.

The rules had changed again, as they so often did, and apparently water was no longer safe.

She longed to feel safe.

Instead, she felt fragile and broken; a damaged person living a damned life.

She shook her head to interrupt her thoughts. She didn't have time to feel angry at God; she would yell at Him later. For now, it was time to start over. Another day. Another facade.

She busied herself by getting ready for school, eventually leaving the house quietly and skipping breakfast once again. It wasn't hard to justify her actions. She did it automatically. Skipping breakfast was all right, necessary even, because she had a math test during first period. She couldn't afford to be sick until it was over.

All day, every day, she moved forward amid pain and fear. She didn't choose to. She had to. And this was her life.



This was *my* life.

For more than a decade, this is how I lived: alone, afraid, and accused of inventing the whole illness by pretty much everyone except my immediate family, primarily because I didn't always look the way you'd expect a constantly sick child to appear.

And it was hell.

Now that I'm away from it, I can look back with more objectivity and understanding. Of course, I still see the pain. I still see the girl who spent most of her conscious thoughts in personal prayer. But I also see a whole lot of grace and God that I couldn't always acknowledge in the heat of the moment. But He was there. I know that now.

For a long time, I testified of the grace of God privately, within my own church building and on my private social media accounts. I never wanted to share my story with the world because I didn't want the world to know me because of my illness. I wanted to separate myself from those experiences and simply forget. I would move on and never talk about it again.

But when you're twenty-three years old, a more than a decade of experiences becomes a hard thing to forget. The more I remember, the more I become convinced that my survival was only attained by the means of some divine intervention or godly grace.

Think about it. How did I survive going days between meals, drinking almost nothing, and barely resting without constantly being hospitalized? How did I get up every day for eleven years and live my own personal hell all over again? How did I endure the bullying and accusations from my peers and even my teachers? How did I physically, emotionally, and spiritually survive? It couldn't have been solely through my own resources. Most of the time my resources had long since been exhausted.

I can no longer testify of grace privately if I'm only doing so to avoid reliving a painful past. And I've experienced far too many miracles over the years to simply stay quiet altogether, especially when so many others are feeling just as lost and abandoned as I did at the time.

So, it's time to be brave for God.

It's time to be brave for you.

This is for all of us; a candid recollection of a child's journey to finding her Savior paired with key lessons I learned about heaven along the way.

This is my testimony. My story. My faith and fears laid out on the page.

So, if you find yourself awake in the middle of the night, questioning God and His grace, or desperately seeking that same Savior of old, I hope this helps. I never wrote this for me; it was always for you.

Prior to writing this book, I faced countless questions and doubts that were designed to hinder my progress and keep this book from seeing the light. What's even more frustrating is that none of those expressions of inadequacy came from the people around me. Instead, it was me. I was the one with the self-doubt. I was the only one who thought that writing a book about Jesus Christ was a task for someone far better than myself.

Many of you, after learning that I only turned twenty-three a few months ago, will probably wonder some of the same things that I wondered when I first felt the need to write this. You too will probably consider me inadequate. You too will probably wonder why I felt prompted to write this book at all. Or maybe you won't. But I wondered about those things.

I soon realized that if I allowed my own self-doubt to mix with fear and intimidation, it would keep me paralyzed from progression. But I did just that and often found myself at a loss on how to even begin.

One night was particularly bothersome. I hadn't attempted to work on this manuscript for several days, failing at my previous goal to designate two to three hours each day toward writing (an admittedly ambitious goal for a young college student). I was angry and frustrated with myself, and suddenly all of those previous insecurities flooded back into my stream of consciousness.

What makes me qualified to teach about something so great and central to all of our lives? What does someone as young as me have to offer? How can my voice and perspective possibly be significant? Surely there is someone better qualified and more educated for such a task.

I began to spiral into self-deprecation.

Fortunately, before I could continue down this train of thought any further, I felt the loving reprimand of the Spirit. Words of chastisement quickly entered my mind.

“What do eighteen-year-old men and nineteen-year-old women have to offer when they choose to serve missions? What makes their voices significant? Of course, there are people better suited for the task ahead, but I have a work for them to do. And as for your own qualifications on teaching such a topic, just what makes you think that you'll be doing the teaching?”

I was sufficiently humbled.

The next morning, I got to work with a newfound reminder that God will qualify His people to run His errands. So here I am, and here you are.

I'd like to add that this is primarily a narrative of how I understand and have come to understand Jesus Christ and His Atonement. I'm not claiming my words as doctrine. I've just had a unique set of challenges thus far in life that have motivated me to study Jesus and His role as my Savior. Your experiences won't be exactly like mine. My testimony has developed because of many personal moments with Him, and if I'm being honest, the idea of sharing those events with whoever picks up this book is slightly terrifying. But I feel compelled to do so anyway.

I was eleven years old when my parents and I really noticed that something was wrong, but I'd had a sensitive stomach long before then. At least, we assumed my stomach was merely sensitive. It didn't occur to anyone that there might actually be underlying health concerns until my symptoms grew more severe. I was in sixth grade, my final year of elementary school, when we started seeing doctors.

But let me back up briefly and introduce myself. I'm Olivia. I was born and raised in Utah as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and yes, I'm a Christian. (That's a common misconception people have about our Church. We are indeed Christian, and we have so many more beliefs in common with you than you might think. But this is not a pitch for you to join my religion, so I'll leave it at that. We're just talking about Jesus here.)

Although I grew up in a religious household, I wasn't exempt from wondering if God even existed at all. As you'll soon find out, that was a question I wrestled with for years.

Our home was always busy and messy, but I didn't mind. There were nine of us there—my parents, five siblings, my aunt, and me. When you add in numerous dogs, cats, bunnies, and even frogs over the years, we were filled completely to the brim. Neighbor kids walked in and out of our house at all hours of the day and night as if it was their own home, and we liked it that way. They were our best friends, and I can recall many summer nights spent playing tag across an entire block of yards. We stayed out until the streetlights turned on and our parents called to us from the porch.

I normally came home covered in dirt and blood. I'm not sure how I did it, but nearly every day I managed to trip and scrape myself on the concrete. For the first seven years of my life, I can't recall many days where I *didn't* have cuts along my forehead and nose. (My neighbor's porch and I were enemies back then, though I'm still baffled that I managed to fall face first on their porch step three times a week.)

I've only become marginally more graceful since then.

I've always been kind of oblivious to my own limitations, which is important to know before we get into the details of this story. I've simply always believed that I was capable of doing the things I wanted to do. As a toddler (and okay, even now), this got me into trouble. I genuinely thought I could do *anything* and *everything* that my parents could. So, I dropped a lot of dishes, got lost in a million public places, and frequently took apart toys and electronics, just to see how they worked. I contributed greatly to my parents' exhaustion, but this confidence in my own abilities to overcome setbacks played a key role in my survival of what we now call "the sick years."

It's impossible for me to give you all the nitty-gritty details of my experiences over the last ten or eleven years, and I wouldn't want to. Most of the days were dark, painful, and pretty much an exact repeat of the story I began this book with. (True, I didn't break a glass *every* night. But most of my days consisted of starving in public just to weep in private. At night you could find me rocking in the fetal position or lying on the cold bathroom floor, waiting for another wave of pain to pass.) I wouldn't want you to read that. (And I certainly don't want to write it.) So, I'm picking the highlights. The most important and significant moments. The times that changed my spirituality.

This brings me to my final piece of introductory information: the title, *Cheerful Christianity*. Though I am an admittedly positive person, a decade of debilitating pain was anything *but* cheerful. And that's why I picked this title. There's a misconception among religious communities that faithful discipleship leads to constant joy and enlightenment. While being a disciple of Christ certainly does bring happiness and light into your life, the absence of those blessings does not mean you're a bad disciple. I am a cheerful Christian but not because life is easy, or because I feel the constant guidance of my Savior. Instead, I am cheerful because with Christ I'm enough. So maybe cheerful Christianity doesn't refer to being happy or positive all the time. Maybe cheerful Christianity refers to finally feeling whole.

CAN GOD LOVE A BROKEN PERSON?

I'm kind of a mess.

I don't think I've met a single individual who actually *liked* middle school gym class. It was a time of humiliation for most of us, and how could it not be? Gather a large group of young, self-conscious teenagers, make them change into the most unflattering clothes imaginable, and force them to show their peers how physically inept they really were.

Okay, maybe not everyone felt that way, but I did. I disliked everything about gym class, but to be completely honest, I didn't participate all that much. By the time I reached seventh grade, my symptoms were a little like this: I experienced near constant aching of my joints. I was hungry—so, so hungry—but everything I ate came right back up. Because gym class was right after lunch, I spent most days in the locker room, vomiting, praying my friends didn't walk in, and wishing I was anywhere else.

But it wasn't long before my peers began to notice, and I wanted to disappear from embarrassment.

It's hard to forgive your body at any age when it can't properly function. But as a child, with friends who teased me for having an eating disorder (which I didn't actually have), I couldn't do anything else but hate my body.

And I continued to hate it all through middle school as my symptoms got worse. Soon I was vomiting in trash cans in public places because that's all that was available. I walked out of most of my classes at least once a day to rush to the restroom or to take a few minutes to cry by myself in an empty hallway because my pain was so severe that I couldn't hold my pencil.

By the end of my ninth-grade year, a couple of my nineteen doctors (yes, you read that right) came up with some reasons I might be ill. First, my gallbladder didn't function, which made it harder to digest certain kinds of food. Second, I was diagnosed with Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis (JRA), which explained the joint pain.

So, I was taken in for surgery, had my gallbladder removed, and started medication for the JRA. And I felt better. I praised God for the first time in years because He had healed me . . . for about a month.

My symptoms returned, stronger than before, and we spent more long and painful years trying to find answers. By my first year of college, I'd tried pretty much every diet imaginable, and nothing worked. I spent many days inside the lab for tests, scans, blood draws, colonoscopies, endoscopies, ultrasounds, and more. But slowly, over the course of my first four years of college, we found real answers.

My body was riddled with infection. I'm not sure how we'd missed it, but it had been there for years. My tonsils in particular were badly infected, which meant I swallowed infection hundreds of times each day. I had stomach ulcers and parasites, both of which required extensive medicinal and dietetic treatments. I'd grown out of my JRA at this point but was diagnosed with fibromyalgia in its place.

I had a hiatal hernia, which essentially meant that my stomach had moved and was going through my diaphragm. It made it hard to breathe and caused instant pain when I ate.

And to top off my list of medical anomalies, I was also allergic to about 33 percent of the world. Things like iron, calcium, the B vitamins. I was allergic to dairy, grains, sugars, vitamin C, yeast, eggs, grass, and so much more. No wonder I couldn't find any type of food that was safe. My body never stood a chance.

So, I spent years undergoing treatments for allergies, parasites, and ulcers. I had surgery on my stomach to fix the hernia, had my tonsils removed, and had an additional surgery to remove excess infection that didn't lie in my tonsils. I got on medication to help manage my fibromyalgia, though it's likely something I'll have to live with.

And while I felt a million times better after all of this, I still wasn't better.

Now, don't get frustrated and close the book. I promise that eventually things did get better for me. But I have to stop my medical history here so we can talk about the one reason you're reading this—Jesus.

Because for over a decade, I prayed earnestly for answers that didn't come. And that was a difficult concept for me to understand. My little adolescent brain couldn't fathom why God would ignore my prayers and pleadings. Didn't He hear me? Didn't He love me? I had spent my whole childhood believing that He did, but suddenly I was second guessing the very foundational doctrines of my testimony.

Looking back, I can see how obviously God was manifesting His love for me. In the heat of the moment, however, I was blind to every single one of His love letters. (That never stopped God from sending them, though. I don't think He'll ever stop trying to love and bless us, even if we never love Him back. It's a pretty miraculous concept when you think about it).

But all of those unanswered prayers? That's when I began to hate Him.

How could God be loving and merciful? If He were truly my Father, then how could He look upon my failing body and broken heart and allow the breaking to continue? What parent, with the power to take every ounce of it away, would allow their child to endure something so horrible and painful, especially beginning at age eleven?

No parent would. No parent *could*.

So, it couldn't be true. God couldn't, and surely didn't, love me. He didn't care about how much pain I was in. He didn't really hear my prayers. And if He did, then He chose to ignore them.

For the first few months, I let myself get angrier and angrier. Though it probably sounds odd, I don't regret a second of that. I spoke forcefully with God in those months. Nobody tells you that's okay to do, but I think it is. For me, it was a very necessary interaction to have with Him.

I don't regret being angry at God. I don't regret the hours I spent yelling at Him because over time I watched that yelling turn to crying, crying turn to pleading, and pleading eventually turn to submission.

I don't regret being angry because I needed a chance to grieve. Grieve the injustice of it all. Grieve my childhood that was quite suddenly and forcefully replaced by the cold realities of living in an imperfect and unjust world.

Eventually I realized that God was all I had. If medical professionals couldn't help me, and I couldn't help myself, then God was my only other option. I remember that moment when things changed for me. I remember thinking, *Okay, God; you win. Let's try this your way.*

Hating God was probably one of the most confusing and emotionally draining experiences of my life, but I'm so grateful for it. I'm grateful that I was angry and that I put so much effort into hating God, because it was the quickest way for me to realize that I was wrong. He wasn't to blame for my pain. He didn't enjoy watching me suffer. And now I can quite confidently say that *every* time I cried, He cried too. Every. Single. Time.

I continued to pray for health, but I also started to put more energy into studying the gospel and in learning if what I'd been taught was true. Was I really a daughter of God?

Because if I *was* a daughter of God, then surely He loved me. And *if* He loved me, then surely He didn't enjoy watching me suffer. So there had to be some greater purpose in it all. But again, that was all entirely dependent on if I was truly *His*.

Although my team of doctors focused on managing my pain levels, I focused on something else: managing my faith. Developing a testimony of my own divinity soon became essential for me, and it changed the entire course of my life. As that testimony grew, I didn't feel quite so small and weak. Knowing who I was to God changed the way I saw myself, others, and even my circumstances. It became the rock that I could hold on to when everything else came crashing down and I wanted nothing more than a sliver of peace. For the first time in my life, I had access to more power than I had ever had before. And that extra power is what we commonly refer to as grace.

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