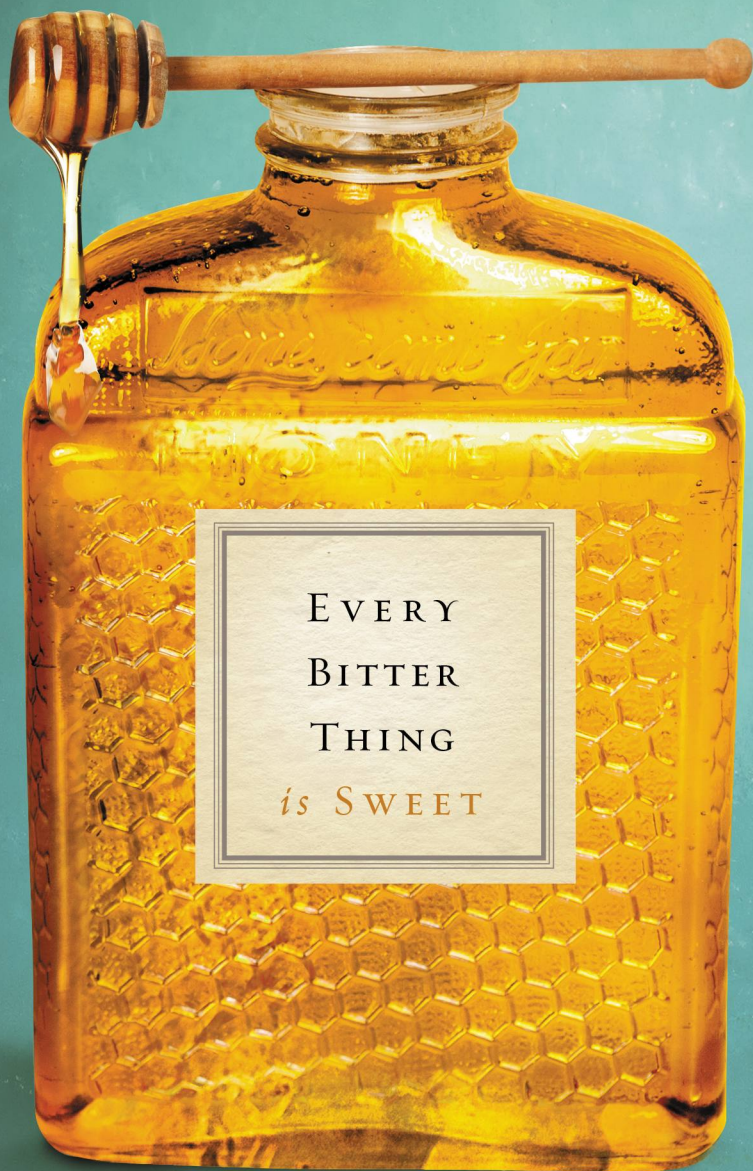


FOREWORD BY KATIE DAVIS

SARA HAGERTY



TASTING THE GOODNESS OF GOD
IN ALL THINGS

ZONDERVAN

Every Bitter Thing Is Sweet

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THE QUESTION UNEARTHED

“Blessed are those who hunger.”

My life wears stretch marks from a child. A child I never conceived yet spent a decade birthing. A child who, in the swirl of my wounds, has healing for me still.

I don't search for a remedy to remove these marks. Though ugly to some, they are a sign of life.

God scarred me with beauty.

He gave me a story to tell. He wrote on my life.

I am branded.



I stepped through the doorway into her home, tentatively.

While I would classify myself as an introvert, social settings are rarely, if ever, intimidating to me. I love stories. And people always carry stories.

That day as I entered the foyer, I met three women: A distracted twentysomething who was constantly reapplying her lip gloss. A girl, underdressed for the occasion, but fashionably confident in her thrift jeans. A jumpered mother whose sleeve wore the remnant of a child's morning oatmeal and whose gray hairs revealed layers of beauty. Each of them had a story.

At another time, that foyer would have been my social

playground. God-prints were all over these women, who, at this intersection, might move from acquaintances to friends.

But this day was different.

The woman reapplying her lip gloss was pregnant. Her story stopped there for me. The jumper-clad, oatmeal-smudged mom clearly had something I didn't. And the girl, I quickly learned, though youthful in demeanor, had three children at home and had just discovered—to her surprise—her womb had been opened again.

I came dressed with confidence and holding a gift wrapped with class, but alongside these women I felt insecure and empty. I had nothing to offer this crew.

Minutes before, driving through those rolling Shenandoah hills, I wanted to turn around and go home. But I had sent my reply. And my desire to please my expecting friend, who was the guest of honor, and her friend, who was hosting this event, trumped my fantasies of changing out of my church clothes into sweats and gulping down a chai.

Baby showers had become a “no go” for me since my little stint of not being able to conceive grew into a state of being. I almost always had an easy out, with a fully scheduled life, but a few times I had to offer my real explanation for not attending. And then, of course, there were always the necessary exceptions.

This shower was my exception. It was for a dear friend, a small shower, and I knew my absence would be obvious. When I had sent my reply, my heart was in a good place. I felt settled with the lot God had given me, and was even more determinedly pleading in prayer with the belief that my day would come.

But grief's tide can't be predicted. Two weeks later, I wasn't so ready to participate in this baby brigade.

But I was there, smiling. Congratulating.

Then, among the wrapping paper rips, the sips of punch, and the clanking of forks on chocolate-smearred plates, the stories began.

At first they were humorous, ones I could easily laugh alongside. Funny, cute, first-days-of-life-in-the-great-wide-open accounts.

But as the gift-opening slowed, it was only natural that the advice for this new mom-to-be filled the empty space.

There were only eight of us. All of whose wombs had been opened but mine—an observation, it seemed, no one else made. On the one hand, I was glad: *Oh, please, let no one feel sorry for me*, I thought when the conversation shifted, even as the membrane between mind and heart disintegrated and I became deeply sorry for myself. On the other hand, I was searching for a way—any way—to put an end to this conversation.

Please stop.

Someone stop these tales of labor and delivery that single me out. Your rite of passage, for me, holds a sign at the front that says Do Not Enter. It carries with it so many questions, so many doubts, fears, and insecurities. About me, and about God. When I open that door, when I go to that place, alone, I am lost.

As the laughter of shared experience increased, this sorority of sisters formed bonds around their anecdotes. And I drifted inward and downward.

Comparison plagued my soul.

At the first opportunity to graciously excuse myself, I left. Since the women didn't seem to notice my silence, I was certain no one would notice my absence.

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Like most pain, until you have known it for yourself, you are blind to it.

In the car, my eyes released tears and my heart soured toward the women I had shared cake with that afternoon. Their stories were no longer alluring to me, and the only God-prints I saw were the ones I lacked.

They were fruitful; I was barren.

In times like this of losing myself in comparison, I didn't see God as a belligerent Father refusing the simple, natural requests of His daughter. He wasn't stern and angry with me, leading out with punishment. He wasn't even absent, His mind caught up in more important matters.

This wasn't about false perceptions of God at all—or so I thought.

It was about me.

My question was not, *Is God good?* But instead, *Is He good to me?* I was overlooked. Forgotten. Not important enough to bless, and easy enough to dismiss.

Cursed.

If the mother whose womb had been opened was living her reward, what had the barren one done to carry such a vacancy?

This question wove itself into the backdrop of my every interaction with those who had what I didn't. And it was the question (and its hidden assumptions) I was learning had to be brought into my conversation with God if I would ever find life through barrenness.



The morning after the shower, I returned to a habit that began years earlier when the darkness on the outside forced a reckoning with God on the inside. I padded around the first floor of

our house on the hill, in the room-to-room circle my feet now knew from memory. The world was silent, the lingering night sky keeping it placid, while I talked to Him.

This season was still barren on the outside; I could hardly point to one area of my life that was working as it should. But I was full on the inside, finding a rhythm of using the pain of my outside circumstances—such as the sting from the shower—to drive me deeper into this secret conversation with God. Just as each foot found its way into an imaginary groove in the floor as I made that circular loop, I was learning where to take my ache. I was creating a space here, inside, for a new home with Him. After years of having a stone-cold heart toward God's whisper and His Word, I began to feel a shift. I had little left but that Word and that whisper. He had whittled me down.

The Bible resting on my chair showed wear—how could it not? My friend, my best friend in this hour, was the Author. The book I'd once used to plan youth ministry talks, the book I'd once used to quote pithy sayings and to confirm opinions I'd already formed, that book had found its way into my deep.

The God behind it was proving Himself to be fundamentally different than what I'd supposed for at least a decade, maybe more. But I was finding Him. In the places I had feared most and spent a lifetime avoiding, He was meeting me. My worst, my very worst, moments were getting rewritten without circumstances changing. I was getting acquainted with the kind of deep satisfaction that bad news can't shake. He was showing me Himself as strong enough. He was letting me hide in Him, letting me find a safe place.

And so I cradled my midnight questions while mamas cradled their babies, and I let God's psalms tell me He cradled

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the answer in Himself. I felt forgotten, but I heard God speak that He had not left me. I felt weak, but I heard Him promise an overshadowing. I felt anxious that my constant fumbblings would annoy Him, but I heard Him say He delighted in me.

And I felt hungry.

I wasn't this hungry when God was a distant coach, forcing me to perform.

I wasn't this hungry when I had a life easily explained, easily predicted.

I wasn't this hungry when everyone understood me.

Pain had created space. Space to want more. Space to taste a sense of being *alive*. An alive that would grow to be my favorite kind of alive: secret, hidden to all eyes but mine and those nearest to me.

This had to be the hope of a lifetime, Him and Him alone.

But redemption is full of dimensions.

Little did I know that staring at Him, looking deeply, wouldn't always be a secret. This new perspective was infectious, inside and out.

Little did I know that I was to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.



A brown hand reached around the gate to pull it open at the sound of our driver's horn. I moved from a posture of absorbing all that was around me—this slice of Africa I'd just met hours earlier—to homing in on the purpose of our travel excursion. My little girl's bed was in this house, enclosed. My son's playing field was in front of me.

We were led by the house mother through the hallway to their rooms. All these months of waiting had allowed me to

fashion this moment one hundred different ways in my mind, none of which I was experiencing now. I had pictured a waiting room, a place where we would collect ourselves before stepping across the threshold of an introduction that would change our lives forever.

As I peeked in and out of rooms, wondering where we'd perch and wait, a split-second interaction would leave me with an armful.

"Meske!?" the house mother shouted from across the hall while stepping into one of the rooms and scooping up all seventeen pounds of Eden's three-year-old body. She thrust her into my arms.

We'd planned that I'd first hold our new son, Caleb, and that Nate would first hold Eden, our new daughter. So I nervously handed Eden what was intended to be Caleb's gift, a bear. My peace offering wasn't necessary. It was me that she wanted.

She wrapped fingers, too small for her age, around the upper part of my arm and didn't let go. (And she wouldn't. For hours.)

My little girl glowed. Her eyes held an expectant look that said, "Can we make up for my lifetime in this one afternoon?" The rise and fall of her chest against me overshadowed the fact that she didn't speak. She breathed safely. She rested. Everything about her little person said amen.

And he? Caleb was Daddy's boy from the minute he saw his white-skinned counterpart. I noted something in him, then, which has taken years of understanding his story for me to name. Caleb met fatherly love for the first time when he met Nate, the kind of love in which you could wrap yourself and find healing by its very nearness.

Nate overshadowed Caleb's story that day. A new day had come. We didn't know how new it was for him until years later. Like any good story, time revealed its layers.

I'm not sure how long we stayed in that home, but things like naptime, potty, and snacks weren't yet on my priority list. We didn't let go of our son and daughter even as we also cuddled the other children who wandered in and out of the room. We wanted our two to know that we were different from the others who'd passed through. As they climbed over and around our laps, we frequently interrupted them to whisper in their ears in broken Amharic: "I am your mommy." "I am your daddy."

What we said, they already seemed to know. As if they were newborns who had spent months incubating inside of their mother, our scent—to them—was like their own. The umbilical cord stretched over a wide ocean but was there, nonetheless. The Father had forged a connection, even before our eyes stared into theirs.

After we bridged what felt like years in just a few hours of nearness, we said our goodbyes to the nannies who had loved them so well. I wondered whether Caleb and Eden knew those goodbyes were forever.

Then we went to the guest home where we were staying and gave the children baths. We dressed them in the pajamas that had been folded in a stack at our home for them for months, in the room that had been our guest room for years. The room that now had plaques with their names painted on them, hung on the wall.

He slept heavily. She spent her first night fighting sleep so she could peer out from the covers every hour or so to make sure we were still there. I'll never forget the sound of the sheets around her little body as she jolted up in bed, paused to get her

bearings, and searched out our silhouettes under the sheets in the bed across from her.

We had become a family, in a moment, yet I still didn't know Caleb's birthmarks or Eden's freckles. I couldn't serve them their favorite meal or find their ticklish spots. They hadn't yet heard my deep belly laugh or become familiar with the way Nate glanced at me, sideways, when he was trying to read my response to something he'd said.

We were also getting acquainted with us as *four*. Each of us was a new part of a new whole, though God had known us as "us" since the beginning of time. We had a history together, though we'd lived apart. We'd each known brokenness and loss, yet with no concept of how those paths would merge into each other's beauty one day.



Healing that had been coursing inside of me, spanning years, surfaced that July in Ethiopia. When my lips brushed Eden's forehead for the first time, a holy vindication echoed throughout the heavens. My life surfaced a win, His win. It had always been there, but now I could touch it. Evidence that God not only loved me but liked me and enjoyed me—something I'd spent decades subtly refuting—now worked its way into my visible story. I got to sweep aside the ashes of years and try on beauty.

And it fit. Just right.

I had grown to know God when no one was looking and when life still wasn't "working" as I'd suspected it should. There, He was the God who saw me and *knew* me and reveled in what He knew. That understanding, as it worked its way into my insides, though not my circumstances, steadied me.

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And now, here I was, in the unfolding fulfillment of many (though not all) circumstances, living wildly alive. God's signature over my barrenness, over my broken story, once unknown, was now a spiritual branding on my flesh.

It said: God is good . . . to me.

For Your Continued Pursuit

Isaiah 61:3 | Romans 9:20–21 | Psalm 32:7 | Job 23:12 | Psalm 27:13 |
Psalm 91:2 | Hebrews 6:19 | Genesis 8:11 | Zephaniah 3:17 | 2 Corinthians
4:17 | 2 Corinthians 2:15 | Colossians 1:16 | Jeremiah 29:11

This section at the end of each chapter is for those readers who, like me, want to trace any spoken declarations back to God's truth and use those as starting points for adoring Him, for making His Word part of their everyday language. Some verses are quoted within each chapter, and others are implied.

EVERY BITTER THING IS SWEET

Tasting the Goodness of God In All Things

By Sara Hagerty , Katie Davis

In the age of fingertip access to answers and a limitless supply of ambitions, where do we find the God who was birthed in dirt and straw? Sara Hagerty found him when life stopped working for her. She found him when she was a young adult mired in spiritual busyness and when she was a new bride with doubts about whether her fledgling marriage would survive. She found him alone in the night as she cradled her longing for babies who did not come. She found him as she kissed the faces of children on another continent who had lived years without a mommy's touch.

In *Every Bitter Thing Is Sweet*, Hagerty masterfully draws from the narrative of her life to craft a mosaic of a God who leans into broken stories. Here readers see a God who is present in every changing circumstance. Most significantly, they see a God who is present in every unchanging circumstance as well.

Whatever lost expectations readers are facing—in family, career, singleness, or marriage—*Every Bitter Thing Is Sweet* will bring them closer to a God who longs for them to know him more. What does it look like to know God's nearness when life breaks? What does it mean to receive his life when earthly life remains barren? How can God turn the bitterness of unmet desire into new flavors of joy?

With exquisite storytelling and reflection, Hagerty brings readers back to hope, back to healing, back to a place that God is holding for them alone—a place where the unseen is more real than what the eye can perceive. A place where every bitter thing is sweet.