

Abba's Heart

31 stories of God's love for His children

compiled and edited by
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ST JOSEPH, MISSOURI USA

ABBA'S HEART

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Contents

1. In His Presence	7
2. New Friendship, New Life.....	11
3. Good Things Coming	15
4. Reckless Love	19
5. That's a God Thing	23
6. Bitter Pill	27
7. The Gift	31
8. A Lesson in Character	35
9. When God was My Valentine	39
10. Love's Pursuit.....	43
11. My Crazy Quilt	47
12. Rescued by Arms of Love.....	51
13. Loved Regardless.....	55
14. Just Believe.....	61
15. Water for a Thirsty Soul	65
16. Marked By Love.....	69
17. Treasure in the Midst of Loss	73

TAMARA CLYMER

18. Pouring Out Love	77
19. God's Overflowing Love	81
20. God Cares	87
21. One of a Kind	91
22. The Daisy	95
23. From Rejected to Accepted!	99
24. Without a Sound	103
25. Abba Provides	107
26. The Truth About Failure	111
27. Tripped by a Lie	115
28. Created to be Loved	119
29. Grandma's Lap	123
30. The Dance	127
31. Father, Do You Love Me?	131
Contributors	135

DAY ONE

In His Presence

Jean Alfieri

*“So encourage each other and build each other up,
just as you are already doing.” — 1 Thessalonians 5:11*

I fumbled for my phone in a rush of confusion when I saw my husband's number pop up. “Why is he calling now?” Josh was halfway across the country, while I was on my way to meet my mom. She was to be transported by ambulance to her apartment where she'd be set up for hospice. It had been a long journey, not just in distance, and I was fragile.

I was still reeling from the trip to Chicago only six weeks ago. After Mom fell and broke her hip, the doctors discovered she had pancreatic cancer. The final stages. She wasn't strong enough for treatment and it was unlikely to be effective anyway. The cancer had already spread. The doctors gave her just six months to live.

How do you wrap your head around that? I hadn't. In the meantime, I was coordinating a layoff at my job. Last week I had put my name on the list to be released and it was approved. I was nowhere near retirement, so I had an intense job search looming.

TAMARA CLYMER

After a delayed flight, confusion with the rental car, and a long drive to Mom's apartment, I was frazzled. And Josh was calling. It was mid-afternoon. He should be busy at work.

"Hey," I answered abruptly.

"Hey," he replied in a shaky voice. He was in his car. I parked mine.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Driving home," he said. "I just got laid off."

"What?!" I was in shock. As Josh explained what happened, the ambulance pulled up to the front doors of Mom's apartment complex and they started unloading her.

Josh paused, waiting for a response.

"It'll be okay," I mumbled. I wasn't sure I believed it, but I didn't know what else to say. "I gotta go."

I rushed inside and up to Mom's apartment. Paramedics were fluffing pillows and making her comfortable as I walked in. Then they left. Mom and I exchanged big hugs, a kiss, and sad smiles as I told her about the call with Josh.

Then I got to work. There was a load of mail piled up, mostly get-well cards. We decided to make a dent in it. There were words of encouragement, some with beautiful Bible verses, but none of it resonated. These words were for my mom.

I came across a small blue leather-bound daily devotional authored by Alistair Begg. I enjoyed listening to his radio program every day. I turned to Mom. "Where did this come from?"

When she shrugged, I asked, "Should we read today's devotion?"

"Yes," she nodded.

I began to read. The devotion was about how the Lord watches out for us as we walk through life and though we may not expect to find ourselves on the road we're on, we can be confident that he guides our steps and that we are on the right path, even

ABBA'S HEART

if it seems certain that we've taken a wrong turn somewhere.

I couldn't go on. These words spoke directly to my heart. I sat next to Mom's bed and put my hand on her arm and set my head down to cry. It was all I could do. I wept.

She put her other hand on my arm and didn't say a word. She didn't have to. Her presence was an encouragement. I'd come all this way to comfort her, and here I was breaking down. And though she had just a short while to live, she was comforting me.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I managed between sobs.

She patted my arm. I knew she was sad too, and she whispered the same words I'd offered to Josh, "It'll be okay."

I finally caught my breath and went to wash my face.

"I'm sorry," I told her when I returned, "I came here for you, and now you're propping me up!"

"That's what we're here for," she said softly. And she was so right.

This transformed my whole perspective. I realized then, the power of the Lord's presence around her, and I wanted it around me. If she could be this strong in faith and offer loving encouragement even in sickness, the least I could do was accept it. I knew I needed to open my heart and embrace the support others would offer.

Though we struggled, my family survived my Mom's passing. And Josh and I were employed again in even better jobs within months.

God searches for us every day. It is in facing our need that we discover the many ways he provides. Sometimes we become so used to giving to others, we forget to receive. I was so caught up in sadness, I kept trying to do what I could for my mom and my family without even noticing what God was trying to do for me.

TAMARA CLYMER

Our Lord provides support in many forms. Be encouraged. You are not alone. And remember to encourage others. To give you have to receive and to receive you have to give.

Prayer

A bba, thank you for always being with us, even when we don't feel Your presence. Thank You for providing for us and guiding our every step. Please help us to remember to encourage others that You are with them too. And may we always bring glory to Your name. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY TWO

New Friendship, New Life

Debbi Barth

“See how very much our Father loves us, for he call us his children, and that is what we are!” — 1 John 3:1a

Love can come to us in so many forms, but I will never, ever forget my first experience of undisguised, full-on love without conditions.

It began when, as insecure eighth-grade schoolmates, my new friend Nancy invited me to her church’s youth group. She and I were in that oh-so-awkward stage of young adolescence—self-conscious, gangly limbed, moody teenagers.

Nancy had been brought up to be active in the life of her church more than on Sundays alone. Her family took that faith and love practice home with them and lived it out all week, every week. They even read the Bible. I had never seen that, though my gentle and wise mother is a living Bible in many ways. Nancy’s family and mine looked outwardly similar, but were at the heart quite different. We were a seriously mismatched pair too, or so it seemed.

Nancy and I were polar opposites in personality. She was the extraordinarily shy one whose face would turn strawberry

TAMARA CLYMER

red if a passing boy said hi to her. I was the Miss Cheerful and outgoing one of our eighth-grade class and thought nearly everyone I met was worth knowing.

We were the most unlikely of friends, but something in Nancy, something deeply embedded in her quiet inner self, sparked my interest. I wanted to know more about what made her life seem so profoundly secure even while going through the unsettling insecurities of adolescence.

I was intrigued by her, her church friends, and the faith they had. In my hidden insecurity and fear of not being enough, I needed the anchoring that they had and which I lacked. It was the nagging, worrying kind of fear that keeps you up at night. In her youth group, people said they actually knew God and that I could as well.

How odd is that? I thought to myself. What a concept! I'd never heard of such a thing before, even after fourteen years of being an active participant in my own church. Painfully shy Nancy invited me to meet the One who, in unconditional love, formed me and had plans for my life. Though unknown to me at the time, these plans would gradually be revealed.

This God-leading-us path is the path of *agape*—unconditional love; unending, unearned love from which we'll never, under any circumstance, be separated from Him. I am so very grateful for His unchanging, forever love in a world of tentative, conditional relationships that may end up lasting forever or be dissolved in an unexpected moment. His love never fails. He is our immovable anchor. Hallelujah.

I am so thankful for shy Nancy, for the people of her church who welcomed me in as a stranger and demonstrated unconditional love, as though I was a member of their inner circle who truly belonged and was valued without having to do a thing. What a novel experience this was of feeling safe and se-

ABBA'S HEART

cure in a world of trying to measure up to others' expectations to be found worthy or good enough. The group accepted me for who I was, not for what I could do for them; they loved me without even knowing my history, asking one question or hearing one confession.

Their love, born of and created in God, pierced my mask, my heart, my soul, leaving me at peace and feeling truly safe and secure for the first time ever. I was a young teen, at the height of a girl's comparison-game style of thinking, at the height of a teenage girl's quest to fit in and be met with acceptance and approval. I saw the heart of God in that youth group, in that bunch of ordinary and yet extraordinary Christians.

God met me right where I was through those church youth, through Nancy's simple invitation that changed my life forever. I went on to accept the Lord's invitation to be His disciple, to experience an on-going personal interchange with Him, and to invite others to know Him as well.

As I grew in that knowledge, I began to experience God's eternal life starting in the here and now. I am forever grateful to my new friend for leading me into a new life, life as a child of God, marked by unconditional acceptance in His larger family. "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

Do you have a Nancy in your life or better yet, are you such a friend to someone else? Whether shy or outgoing, how are you showing the agape love of God in your everyday interactions, whether at home or elsewhere? Your love for others can help introduce them to the One who provides that all-encompassing agape kind of love.

If you have never know agape love, I invite you to pray for God to bring it to you. Then keep your eyes and mind open because He will in time, and perhaps in a form that seems unexpected.

Prayer

Lord, make me a welcoming person in the lives of others. Bring me into full relationship with You today. Let the unconditional acceptance and love You have given me pour out to those whom You put in my path today. Awaken in them and in myself a deep thirst to know and walk in Your love forever. And where I am not walking in love toward myself or another, I ask your forgiveness and repent of that heart attitude. Give me the wisdom, power, and agape love to forgive and to initiate a new chapter to any broken or bruised relationship in my life. Glorify Yourself in it all, Lord. In Your name, amen.

Good Things Coming

Lindsey Bell

“And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.” — Romans 8:28

Growing up, I never doubted God’s love for me. But that all changed when I reached adulthood, and my life started spinning out of control.

I’ll never forget the nine words that started it all. “I’m sorry, but I can’t find a heartbeat anymore.” When our doctor said those words to me, I was twelve weeks pregnant. I thought we were past the risky part of pregnancy. We had even seen the heartbeat weeks before. His words shook me to my core.

But it’ll be okay, I thought. We’ll get pregnant again, and it’ll be okay.

Only it wasn’t. Three months later, on New Years Day, I woke up, took a pregnancy test, and saw those two pink lines. This is how God is going to redeem our brokenness, I remember thinking. I was sure we were going to get our rainbow baby (our child after loss, if that’s not a term you’ve heard before). Not even four hours later, though, we miscarried again. Then, six months af-

TAMARA CLYMER

ter that, we lost baby number three. One year later, as I sat in church the Sunday before Thanksgiving, I felt that familiar pain and knew miscarriage number four was inevitable.

What a painful trick, I thought, allowing me to get pregnant four times but never allowing me to hold these babies I already loved. There was very little giving thanks on that Thanksgiving.

One miscarriage I could make sense of. I knew God might not protect me from everything. But four? How could a God who claimed to love me—a God I believed was fully capable of fixing this—choose not to do it? It didn't make sense.

If God really loved me, I thought, surely He wouldn't allow this. Maybe you've thought something similar. Maybe you've thought there were certain situations that a loving God would never allow into your life.

Romans 8:28 had been a favorite verse of mine for years—long before this season of difficulty began. It took on new meaning during this season of my life, though. “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (NIV).

I found myself asking him often, “All things, God? Even this?”

His gentle whisper was clear each time. “Yes, child, even this.”

That verse in Romans doesn't say God works for the good in most things or in some things or in the good things. The words are clear that God works for our good in *all* things.

That small word, *all*, makes a big impact. All includes miscarriages. And infertility. And cancer. And divorce. And broken relationships. And abuse. And car wrecks. And disease. And whatever other situation you might find yourself in. In all things, God works for our good.

Sometimes in the middle of our heartache, it's hard to imagine how God could possibly use something so terrible for our good.

ABBA'S HEART

I never could have imagined what God was doing in our situation. When I was busy doubting His love for me and convinced He didn't really care, He was working something out in the background. He was working in the heart and life of a young teen mom and preparing her to choose adoption for her unborn child. He was also putting our names in the minds of multiple people she would soon seek guidance from. When she asked these families if they knew anyone who might want to adopt her child, they all recommended us, even though we had never even really considered adoption.

Those things don't happen by accident. Families don't usually get approached about adoption when they aren't seeking to adopt first. Those families mentioned us to our son's birth mom because it was part of God's plan to work good in all things. When it comes to God, there's no such thing as a coincidence.

Take a quick scan through the Bible, and you'll see it again and again. What Satan intends for our destruction, God turns around and uses for our good. Daniel was sent to the lion's den. Satan thought he won. God proved otherwise. Esther and her people were sentenced to death. God flipped that situation around too.

Don't forget about the biggest surprise of all. Jesus was sent to the cross, and Satan thought his victory was certain. God won again. In fact, it was the very act that Satan thought guaranteed his victory that actually guaranteed God's. Satan will throw trials our way, causing us to doubt God's love for us. But our stories aren't over as long as God is in charge. There are good things coming.

Prayer

Father, this stuff is hard. You've told us that life would be full of difficulties, but this thing I am going through right now seems impossible to overcome. I am afraid, hurt, angry and disappointed, but I know You can and will take this situation and turn it around for my good. Thank You for not being surprised by my feelings and for turning even the most difficult stuff around for my good. Help me to see the good and to trust Your plan and love for me in the midst of this. In Jesus' name, amen.