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PART ONE



OUR GUARDING GOD

CHAPTER I



TRUE PLACES

It is not down in any map; true places never are.

—HERMAN MELVILLE IN *MOBY DICK*

The summer before I turned forty years old, I learned something about my storm-tossed soul that ushered in a fresh experience of Jesus.

I sat on a sagging bed in a rented apartment where my family had traveled for a ministry assignment in a city over a thousand miles from home. The dirty bedroom with cracked walls and carpet stains offered the early morning setting where I was about to read a passage of Scripture that wouldn't let me go. I tied my hair back in a rubber band—the kind that come in packs of twenty but can rarely be found when needed—and adjusted my glasses. I heard our children, now in the preteen and teenage years, scrambling to get dressed. I stretched out a hand to find a mug and gulped down the coffee with hazelnut creamer my husband had delivered like it was vital medication for the ailment called *waking up in the morning*. I flipped open the Bible, ready to pour all this exhaustion, anxiety, and homesickness onto any words that could neutralize these emotions.

I turned to Psalm 97 and read from verse 10 that God “guards the lives of his faithful ones.”

I stared at that word—*guards*—as if seeing it for the first time.

I swallowed more coffee. I kept staring.

It seemed like such a clear, easy statement to understand—*God guards the lives of His faithful ones*—and yet I wasn't sure I fully got it. Believers in Jesus were counted as His faithful ones, and this included me, but what could it mean that God guards us? This verb presented a secure and safe reality, but in my Christian life, I rarely felt *secure*. If God was guarding me, I certainly didn't know how to experience this in any tangible form. The questions persisted like termites chewing at my soul: Is God guarding us? Where is He guarding us? For what purpose?

The simple verb ignited a firestorm of urgent questions within because I knew I wasn't living as one guarded by God. Someone God guards surely wouldn't feel this unstable, unsettled, and immature.

I refilled the mug and began the search that would profoundly change my soul, transforming my inner being into something stable, settled, and mature.

“Guards,” is *shamar* in Hebrew, which means to hedge about, keep safe, protect, watch carefully, preserve. Usually *shamar* refers to the “keeping” of the law—guarding, observing, and carefully preserving God's words—but when used in multiple psalms, the word suggests a person fenced in an enclosure being carefully watched over and protected. The psalmists often connected God's guarding presence to a physical, surrounding location like this. King David, for example, asks God to guard him as he takes *refuge* in Him and makes Him his *fortress* (Psalms 16:1; 31:2).

Finally, the “lives” that God guards is actually the word for “souls,” so a more precise translation of this phrase in Psalm 97 is “God guards the souls of His people.”

But where is guarding happening? Where is this refuge?

Where is this fortress? Since it's not anything we can see with our eyes, how are we to think of it?

Searching the Scriptures to examine *what* God guards and *how* He guards it in us, I learned that the Bible presents us with a Savior who dwells in our inner being by the Holy Spirit and who imparts all the characteristics of God's guarding presence to our soul. I wanted to learn every aspect of what this guarding presence was like because I hadn't come to know Jesus like this. I knew Him as my salvation and that I was seated with him in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6), but I didn't know Him as a *Guarding* God. I didn't know everything He was doing in my soul.

Could understanding more about our Guarding God help us as Christians “grow up in [our] salvation” (1 Peter 2:2) so we would become “thoroughly equipped” for the good works God had prepared for us to do (2 Timothy 3:17; Ephesians 2:10)? I wasn't sure what I would discover as I searched the Scriptures to learn more, but I just knew this: God was already beginning to transform me as I met Him as my Guarding God.

On the very day I prayed that God would teach me more about His guarding presence, I watched as my husband, Ashley, prepared our older daughter for her first day out alone in the city without us. While Ashley and I kept busy with ministry assignments in this new city, our younger daughter was enrolled in the camp provided. But our older had the freedom to choose some independent activities. For the first time in her life, she would ride her bike *alone* to meet her friends, enjoy a lunch out at a restaurant, and then spend the afternoon hanging out downtown. She was growing up—this was normal and right—but I wasn't ready.

Her dad delivered final instructions as he adjusted her helmet around her blond ponytail. I heard him remind her about her bike

lock, wallet, and phone, but then all I could think about was losing her to kidnapping, traffic accident, or random disaster. I said good-bye and watched her pedal off from our apartment.

Then the anxiety came. I just knew something terrible would happen. I left for my seminary classes that were part of ministry training, trying desperately to focus on the lectures. During the day, the phone buzzed with several text messages. I plunged my hand into my bag, breathless and nervous each time. Was Sarah hurt? Was she missing? Had a flood come and swept her into a ravine?

The stream of messages came:

“She made it through the intersection! I see her!” Ashley texted. He even snapped a photograph; I could see that blond ponytail flying and those feet pedaling with confidence.

And later:

“She’s with her friends! I’m going to ‘accidentally’ meet her and give her more money for lunch.”

And later:

“She’s in the restaurant. She’s doing great! I see her.”

All day long on that first day Sarah was without us, my husband trailed our daughter in the minivan, unseen by her. He was guarding her carefully, watching over all of her needs, and assuring her well-being. Sarah never knew her daddy was following her that first day on her own, but he was. He was there the whole time.

As I sat there with the phone, tears formed. I imagined the gentle whisper of God deep in my soul: “This is what it’s like between you and Me. I guard you like this. I’m taking care of everything that concerns you.”

And that simple verb, guard, became my new favorite word in Scripture.



As a writing instructor specializing in vivid verbs, I teach college freshmen that every verb they use should evoke a mood and an image. “Never waste a verb,” I tell them, closing my eyes and tenting my hands together like we’re sharing a sacred moment. When one of them uses a particularly vivid verb—perhaps assuage, embellish, or fritter—I clap with joy and might even hop up and down.

When we read the verb *guard*, we cannot help but feel protected, secure, important, kept close, and carefully observed. The verb feels demanding; it proclaims the urgent protection of a precious person. I stared again at the verb and then wrote down the truth: *God guards me. God guards me right now.*

I closed my eyes.

I felt seen. I felt enclosed. I felt protected.

Something sparked in my soul. Something blossomed. Something formed. It was as if that verb architected a whole new place within, brick by brick. Each brick became a different facet of the Guarding God operating inside me based on everything I’d ever read about God in the Bible. That day, I began to synthesize all I knew about Him and uncovered that someone in God’s guarding care lives in five new ways:

A person God guards lives with *confidence, peace, hope, strength*, and *as crucified with Christ*. These five realities were the unlimited

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privileges of becoming a child of God. These five realities represent what Jesus offers and works into the human soul. Theologian Dallas Willard explains, “Spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”¹

Our inner world can indeed become like Christ. We can find, through Jesus, maturity and stability, drawing joy from a continual source of intimacy with Him. People who know Jesus like this would have the emotional regulation and well-being I wanted but had never accessed. They would love Him and worship Him even more because they knew Him in these new ways.

I knew that I didn’t live like someone who experienced Jesus’ guarding and keeping care. Instead of resting in God’s guarding care, I stayed trapped in a pinball machine of unstable living, ricocheting between these five toxic mindsets: condemnation, anxiety, hopelessness, weakness, and self-absorption. Even while I enjoyed months of spiritual growth and intimacy with Jesus, I felt like I backslid into a default state of instability more often than I wanted to. Could I grow up into my salvation in such a way that I could experience God’s guarding care all day long? I didn’t want to live such a fragile life anymore.

Instead of a *guarded* mindset, I had a *distressed* mindset.

Reading that God guarded me was like an invitation to another kind of living with a different set of opposing and triumphing mindsets. This kind of living was a decisive revolution that dethroned what kept me miserable and disconnected from Jesus, others, and even myself. In the fresh space of my soul, I learned the truth:

Jesus offers righteousness to combat condemnation and shame (Romans 8:1).

Jesus transfers His peace to soothe anxiety (Philippians 4:7).

Jesus supplies His hope to flood light into dark despair (Romans 15:13).

Jesus infuses His power to aid our weakness (Ephesians 1:19).

Jesus lives in us to transform a self-life into a crucified life (Galatians 2:20).

Christ was guarding me and offering these unlimited privileges; I needed to learn how to take up residence in my own soul with Jesus and learn a different way to be. And it wasn't all just about *me*; the inward work of knowing a Guarding God was about so much more than just my own soul and my own life. Christ guarded me alongside other believers who were together manifesting God's presence. His guarding presence was always an invitation to move more and more outside myself to connect with others and minister to them. I had wanted to experience what the Bible calls "the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27), but my emotions and inner world often isolated and separated me more than connected me to others.

But Jesus was offering me a soul-makeover, a complete renovation that would heal the deepest parts of me and grow me into maturity and deep, authentic connection with others. Jesus is also called *Immanuel* (Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23), which means *God with us*, and this renovation and subsequent maturity had everything to do with learning *how* Jesus was with me, with us.



Before learning *how* God was guarding me, I had to understand more of *where* He was guarding me. Perhaps like me, you're

a visual learner, and picturing this abstract concept helps you grasp biblical truth. If we examine images where God's people imagined His guarding care in Scripture, we see the repetition of these images: shield, refuge, rock, tower, or fortress.² In Psalm 18:2, for example, we see David proclaiming his confidence in God's love and protection when he describes these images: "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take

refuge, my shield." Picture these images in your mind: a rock, a fortress, a shield.

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Over and over again throughout the Psalms, we see images of invisible structures into which these writers imaginatively placed themselves under guard by a powerful, loving, all-seeing God. But they aren't

physical places. It's just like what Herman Melville wrote in *Moby Dick* when describing a setting. He claims, "It is not down in any map; true places never are."

The fortresses, shields, and refuges of God are true, but unseen places. They are spiritual images or metaphors that helped the biblical writers understand how God was guarding their souls. David wasn't literally present in any of these towers, fortresses, shields, and refuges, but in his spiritual reality, he was there. So strong was this spiritual understanding that David even proclaims in Psalm 11:1, "In the Lord I take refuge. How then can you say to me: 'Flee like a bird to your mountain?'" In other words, David tells us—"I'm already in a place of safety, so I don't need to run to another place of protection." *We don't need to run anywhere else. Jesus is our refuge.*

David, well before the coming of Christ who instructs us on His indwelling presence, understood that he was somehow dwelling in God, taking refuge there.

God's guarding presence is also *in our souls*. Does this seem strange or hard to believe? Many passages of Scripture indicate this reality as noted by 2 Corinthians 13:5, where Paul simply asks, "Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is *in you*?" We might look to Ephesians 3:17, where Paul says that Christ is dwelling "*in your hearts* through faith." God's guarding presence is within us at this very moment if we've invited Jesus to dwell there by receiving His free gift of salvation.

This indwelling Christ that was once so hard to picture suddenly had clarity when I remembered David's dwelling places. Every biblical image of God as this external shield, tower, fortress, or refuge applies *within our very own souls* because of the indwelling Christ by the Holy Spirit. God Himself is our dwelling place, our refuge, and our fortress (Psalms 90:1; 91:2) and this happens within us. Jesus invites us to live from our inner being, and as David did, we can picture ourselves in the fortress of God's guarding care in our souls.

It now didn't matter that I was in an old apartment in a strange city. I was in a different setting in my soul—in a fortress of God's guarding care. It was like a Promised Land inside .

Maybe this is what Jesus wanted for us all along when He taught about our inner being. In one of His most powerful teaching moments—during the Feast of Tabernacles (which was the Jewish festival remembering how the Israelites lived in temporary dwellings while wandering in the wilderness)—He says something astonishing about our inner being, the dwelling place of God. We read in John 7:37–39:

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

Jesus claims that He is “living water” and that He can flow “from within” us. These images counted as revolutionary words in a setting where Jews celebrated external dwelling places and years of wandering before entering the Promised Land of Canaan. Essentially, Jesus proclaimed a new kind of dwelling—an indwelling, and another kind of Promised Land *within*.³

Think of the fresh, nourishing, vibrant life of Jesus right now in our inner being. This is a new life, lived from within, that aligns us to the indwelling Christ all day long.



If you’re anything like me, you don’t always feel the fresh, nourishing, vibrant inner life because your outer life suffers. Life, for you, might feel more like a dry desert than a flowing river. You aren’t alone. In 2 Corinthians 4:16 we read, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” God’s guarding presence renews us, although on the outside, life might not look as abundant as we had hoped. You may agree with the idea that parts of your life are “wasting away” through such things as aging, disease, loss of loved ones, or any category of disappointments, but you might not have ever experienced “being renewed day by day.”

You might be reading this and wonder how to keep reading because of some terrible thing that has happened in your life. You

don't presently feel guarded in the fortress of God's loving care, and you didn't feel guarded when *that thing* happened. I pray you'll find encouragement as you read on. Besides coming to terms with my own journey of anxiety and depression as I sought to understand how God guards my soul, I encountered many scenarios of suffering Christians who nevertheless know something deeply true about Jesus that goes beyond what's happening to them physically or even in their own minds.

I felt inspired—and troubled—by their stories. How could they live from their inner beings when life was falling apart around them? What do they know about Jesus that enables this?

In one weekend alone, I met with a woman whose marriage was ending but who nevertheless knew an indescribable peace, hope, and strength from Jesus. I sat in a living room with someone who faces a lifetime of chronic pain and disease. She takes her frail body and worships Jesus facedown on the floor of her bedroom because He has been so good to her. I spent time with a grieving couple whose first child had died unexpectedly and who still came to church to worship Jesus. This was just in my own small town. The online community connects us to even more friends going through unimaginable pain. So if you aren't presently suffering, you likely know many who are. You might be wondering, "Can they worship a God who allows this kind of loss and pain?"

Yes, they can. And they *do*.

Think of Corrie ten Boom in her wonderful book *The Hiding Place* and the power and beauty of a faith that knew God's love in the starvation, pain, and humiliation of the Nazi concentration camp. Corrie describes the moment her dear sister, Betsie, died beside her. As Betsie breathed her last in the freezing sleet amid the horrors of that place, she whispered, "We must tell people what we

have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still. They will listen to us, Corrie, because we have been here.”⁴ Later, Corrie would say, “With Jesus even in our darkest moments, the best remains and the very best is yet to be.”

I also remembered the story of the great hymnist Horatio Spafford who penned the famous hymn “It Is Well with My Soul.” He wrote, “When peace like a river, attendeth my way/ When sorrows like sea billows roll / Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well, with my soul.”

It is well with my soul.

Do you know the story of why and how Spafford wrote that line? Spafford’s four daughters drowned in a shipwreck. What many people don’t realize is the reason why Spafford wasn’t on that ship; he sent his family on the journey across the Atlantic without him as he tended to the disaster back home, the Great Chicago Fire, that financially ruined him. When Spafford left Chicago to meet his grieving wife, the historical account states that he was inspired to write “It is well with my soul” as the ship passed the very spot where his daughters were believed to have drowned.⁵ Yes, he penned this declaration in catastrophic loss. What could be worse than financial ruin, the death of his beloved daughters, and journeying to meet his grieving wife? Yet he proclaimed, “It is well with my soul,” and I was beginning to think that, no matter what happened to me, I could too. And so could you.

When I thought of both Corrie ten Boom and Horatio Spafford and how, in the midst of horrific loss, they somehow knew God’s guarding presence and love—that it could “be well with their souls”—I continued to ask the age old question: How? How could Paul, for example, say in Philippians 4:11 that he had “learned to be content whatever the circumstances”?

I had always wanted a God who guards my life and every external thing that concerns me. We all do. But I paused and reflected on the psalmists who wrote in the midst of danger and loss. I paused as I considered Paul writing from a Roman prison. I paused when I remembered Corrie ten Boom and Horatio Spafford. I paused, thinking of Jesus who could say, “Not as I will, but as you will” when faced with unimaginable, incomprehensible, agonizing execution on a cross (Matthew 26:39). It wasn’t always well with their lives, but it was *always well with their souls*.

Knowing God guards our soul—and doesn’t necessarily promise physical well-being—provides a powerful opportunity: the opportunity to live not in bitterness, anger, cynicism, and disillusionment—but to live in the righteousness, hope, peace, power, and selflessness of the gospel. After all, we know that the world we live in exists in “bondage to decay” (Romans 8:21). In many ways, we should expect disease, pain, and suffering as we live in a fallen world where sin and Satan operate.

But nothing can harm a soul God guards. Because of this Guarding God, we learn to dwell in our soul more than in our life’s external realities, and we become strong and unshakeable in a world that’s falling apart. God is guarding our souls and teaching us to live from our inner being instead of our external circumstances.

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And we more deeply know a God who has rescued our souls and keeps us in His embrace.

We meet Jesus who guards our soul, and we worship Him. We know that God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Ephesians 1:11). We can say, like Paul, “What has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance” (Philippians 1:19). This soul was made to experience Jesus even in sorrow and suffering because we trust His goodness and ability to work “for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28) in all things. And when we cannot see how or when, we know that we have everything we need right here because Jesus is dwelling within us, closer than our own hearts.

All of these stories—the heroes of the Christian faith and the suffering ones you and I know—can be the way God shakes us up to know Him better. As I thought of Victor Hugo’s words “God stirs up the soul as well as the ocean,”⁶ I was stirred up. I was shaken. Hannah Whitall Smith calls this experience the “shakings of God” that disturb every false resting place of our soul so we rest in God alone, our true kingdom, our true resting place.⁷

Are you ready to connect with Jesus in a new way and receive all the benefits of His guarding care? Are you ready to let the truths of God’s guarding presence work like Aspen seedlings turning into far-spreading, indestructible roots that stretch out to overtake your emotions and experiences? As we study the aspects of our Guarding God, we’re invited to become “strong in the Lord” (Ephesians 6:10) and like the person described in James 1:4 who is “mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

You can know God like this—the way the psalmists knew Him, the way Paul knew Him, and the way both so many heroes of the faith and ordinary Christians seem to know Him. They learned

the secret of living from *their inner being* and not from external circumstances. We, too, can dwell in His guarding presence in our inner being. Brother Lawrence, the Carmelite monk, wrote in the seventeenth century this reflection:

I cannot imagine how religious persons can live satisfied without the practice of the presence of God. For my part, I keep myself retired with Him in the depth of centre of my soul as much as I can; and while I am so with Him, I fear nothing; but the least turning from Him is insupportable.⁸

Wouldn't you love to retire with Him in the depth and center of your soul all day long? We can, right now, cultivate an unshakable inner world. In this unseen but true place, we meet our Guarding God who rescues us and keeps us in His grip.

STIRRING OUR SOULS



1. Read Ephesians 3:14–21. Which words in the passage make you most eager to know Jesus better? Which parts of this passage have you personally experienced? Which parts do you pray you could experience more in your life?
2. How have you been taught to think about your “inner being”? When you imagine “rivers of living water flowing from within” you (John 7:37–39), what comes to mind?
3. Write down one or two examples from your own life when something terrible happened that “turned out for your deliverance” or “for your good” (see Philippians 1:19; Romans 8:28). Or have you experienced a moment where you could say, like Betsie ten Boom, “There is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still”?
4. In your own words, write down what you think Paul knew about God that allowed him to be “content in any and every situation” (Philippians 4:12).