

# If Love Runs Out

Seeing my worth after my husband left

[Margot Starbuck](#)

*Worthless garbage to be discarded.*

That has been the naughty hiss of the voice in my head in the months since my husband left.

Worthless.

Garbage.

Discarded.

The voice has a pesky mosquito-like quality. I swat it away, batting it from my face and ears. It subsides for a few moments. I relax. It attacks again.

## Another Story

*I know better.*

And I think most of us, at some level, do. But I make my living by telling the story that is true. In speech and in print, I announce the good news that no matter what the faces in our lives have reflected to us about our worth, each one of us is inherently worth loving.

In fact, when my husband left, I had already submitted this very message to my publisher in book form. For months I'd carefully crafted a book that would be good news for readers who suffered from shame. The good news, of course, is that no matter what the formative faces in your life have reflected about your worth, you are undeniably worth loving.

But when my life crumbled it was too late to tell the publisher, "Stop the press! This book was for *other* people! I'm pretty sure it's true, but maybe I should give it a more thorough test run . . ."

A single swirling question buzzed in my ear: "Is it still true *now*?"

## Girl Armor

God had already healed so much of my broken heart.

I learned that I wasn't worth showing up or sticking around for.

Adopted as an infant into a home with alcoholism, violence, and divorce, my experience had taught me that trusted people went away. I learned that I wasn't worth showing up or sticking around for. Everyone weathers loss differently, and I armored up. I built a shell around my heart to protect myself from getting hurt again.

It even worked for a while.

But girl-size armor is not built for grown-ups. As I moved into adulthood, a series of relationships demolished my little girl-sized shell. When a college roommate who was single became pregnant, the first fissure appeared. Nine months later, holding her precious son, five hundred more cracks appeared in the armor around my heart.

Moved by the wonder of the baby boy, I found my birthparents. My birthmom was delighted to know me, but my birthfather said he'd pass. Rejected. Again.

The blow I never saw coming was marriage. Suddenly there was someone who was legally obligated to stick around for me. The sudden security allowed me to feel the depths of the earlier ruptures I'd tried so hard to spackle over. I felt them in their agonizing fullness.

Those pains were, however unlikely, the beginning of healing.

## **Unwieldy Process**

The parents of a childhood friend invited me to attend a summer healing conference at Wheaton College, just blocks from my childhood home, and I gladly accepted.

Five years into marriage, standing toe-to-toe with a prayer minister in the balcony of Edman Chapel, God gave me an unlikely vision. To my spiritual eye, it looked like a Tootsie Pop that had been cracked and gnawed and chewed. Its surface showed not only cracks and craters, but areas where large chunks of shell had been removed.

I knew it was a picture of my broken, healing heart.

That process turned out to be more lengthy and costly and invasive than I'd bargained for. It involved therapy, more prayer from sturdy, steadfast friends, medication, tears, time.

Though your experience is necessarily different from mine, the *bzzz* of that naughty mosquito swirls in all of our ears at some point. When a parent leaves. When one dies. When a spouse is unfaithful. When life doesn't turn out like we thought it might.

At my lowest point, God spoke four words to that desperate heart:

*I am for you.*

Seven more words would join the original four:

*I am the one who is with you and for you.*

God wasn't just cheering me on from the heavens. God was *with* me.

A few years later, walking a stony labyrinth during a silent retreat, I glimpsed another holy vision. On the surface it looked like a beautiful ball of yarn, except that the sphere was wound with shiny satin ribbons in every color of the rainbow. I knew that at the center—like the soft center of a Tootsie Pop—was my bandaged healthy heart. That was supposed to be the end of the story.

For a decade it was.

## **True Now?**

"Is it still true *now*?"

That's the question, right?

Though your experience is necessarily different from mine, the *bzzz* of that naughty mosquito swirls in all of our ears at some point. When a parent leaves. When one dies. When a spouse is unfaithful. When life doesn't turn out like we thought it might.

"Is it still true now? If I'm not loved, am I worthless garbage to be discarded or am I still worth loving?"

I choose *worth loving*.

During his own dark night, Henri Nouwen wrote, "God says to you, 'I love you, I am with you . . . This is the voice to listen to.'" And he underscores the importance of choosing for that foundational truth: "That listening requires a real choice . . . as you keep choosing God, your emotions will gradually give up their rebellion and be converted to the truth in you."

In my deep places I believe that truth truly does set us free.

At a recent women's retreat, the kind where I ask women to identify the lies they've believed and allow God to replace them with his truth, I sat myself down in cold damp grass and listened hard. I let God know I was done with *worthless*. Done with *garbage*.

The replacement?

*You're mine.*

Some days it feels next to impossible. But daily I'm choosing it.