

Foreword by Sarah Mae, Angela Perritt & Ruth Schwenk

own  
your  
life

*Living with deep intention, bold faith,  
and generous love*

SALLY CLARKSON

If you've ever wondered what a life well lived looks like, you'll find the secret between the pages of this book. Sally Clarkson generously opens up her story with the hospitality of a mentor, a mother, and a friend wrapped into one. On these pages you'll discover inspiring examples of what life to the full can look like when you are fully surrendered to Christ.

**LISA-JO BAKER**

Author of *Surprised by Motherhood* and community manager for (in)courage

Since the time my children were babies, I have been so challenged by reading Sally Clarkson's writings. She's inspired me to embrace each day, find simple ways to cultivate beauty in my home, and take time to invest in myself so that I can better nurture and bless my family. If you are a busy woman who longs to live with meaning and purpose, you'll be blessed by reading *Own Your Life*. It's packed with heartfelt encouragement and practical strategies to help you savor life more and make each moment count.

**CRYSTAL PAINE**

*New York Times* bestselling author of *Say Goodbye to Survival Mode* and founder of MoneySavingMom.com

Sally is a woman teeming with wisdom and zest for life, and they're contagious both in her presence and in her written words. Every moment I've shared with her has been a blessing, and it's an honor for all of us that she so graciously shares her life lessons and timeless truths in her writing.

**TSH OXENREIDER**

Author of *Notes from a Blue Bike*

Life was made to be lived with purpose. But sometimes our busy and broken lives get in the way of our intentions. *Own Your Life* is more than an inspirational book; it's a guidebook to living a life that matters.

**KRISTEN WELCH**

Author of *Rhinestone Jesus*; <http://wearethatfamily.com>

Sally writes with as much compassion and concern as she displays when chatting with a dear friend. She and her husband have an abundance of experience, including thirty years of marriage, parenting, world travel, and more, and the interesting personal stories Sally shares provide solid,

incredibly applicable wisdom. As she intimately draws you into each story, her words will break down the barriers that keep you from owning your life and will motivate you to fulfill your God-given purpose.

**JENNIFER SMITH**

Author of *The Unveiled Wife* and founder of [Unveiledwife.com](http://Unveiledwife.com)

Too often we get caught up in the daily chaos, and we miss the realization that we're leaving a legacy. *Own Your Life* shows readers how to live the God-shaped destiny designed for them. Living for God's Kingdom and glory is something Sally Clarkson does with all that she is . . . and now her caring, wise voice guides readers on how to do the same. This book is perfect to read with a friend or small group. Highly recommended!

**TRICIA GOYER**

Author of forty-five books, including *Balanced*

This book, rich with the wisdom of a life lived intentionally, is a gift to women of all ages. It's the tool we need to ask God what He wants us to dream for Him and how He wants us to live that dream. Sally emboldens and equips us to make faith-filled choices and to live with generous love, no matter what the cost. She meets us where we are—in the hard places of real life—and gently leads us to where God waits to mold us into our best selves.

**ELIZABETH FOSS**

Author of *Real Learning* and coauthor of *Small Steps for Catholic Moms*;  
[www.elizabethfoss.com](http://www.elizabethfoss.com)

Sally Clarkson has always been such an incredible inspiration to me as I've fumbled along this path of parenting, and I count myself blessed to have her words and wisdom mentor me along the way. Once again, Sally has written a book full of godly advice and wisdom, pointing us to the ultimate example and mentor of all. As I read *Own Your Life*, I found myself feeling as though I was cozied up on Sally's couch with a warm cup of tea, soaking up every bit of motherly and yet godly wisdom on how to truly live a beautiful life of balance and purpose.

**SUMMER SALDANA**

Writer/blogger at [SummerSaldana.com](http://SummerSaldana.com)

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## CHAPTER 1

# SEEING BEAUTY AND PURPOSE IN YOUR ORDINARY DAYS

### *Owning the Hero Who Lives inside You*

*What distinguishes men of genuine achievement from the rest of us is not so much their intellectual powers and aptitudes as their curiosity, their energy, their fullest use of their potentialities. Nobody really knows how smart or talented he is until he finds the incentives to use himself to the fullest. God has given us more than we know what to do with.* SYDNEY J. HARRIS

*The people who know their God will display strength and take action.*

DANIEL 11:32

STANDING TO MY FULL HEIGHT, I pranced down the imaginary platform in my den, acting out the time when I would be crowned Miss America. As with many girls born in the 1950s, watching this contest on television had become a yearly ritual. Even as a little girl posing as a beauty queen, I knew in my heart I was born to become someone significant.

Reading books about heroes of history further fed these dreams. Whether Florence Nightingale, braving the filthy trenches of war to save lives, or Madame Curie, who helped pave the way for new cancer treatments, I was right there with them in the story, visualizing how I would help save my world in some small way.

Fast-forward a couple of decades, when I found myself squishing next to my seven-year-old son on a couch, munching chocolate chip cookies and sharing a “little boy” moment.

“Mama, you know what? I think Superman was just like Jesus. He came from a far-off place to save his world. I think I am going to be Superman when I grow up because I am going to do something to save my world.”

Sitting up straighter with his chest puffed out, Nathan said, “You know what? Superman is inside me just waiting to come out!”

Perhaps all children anticipate how they might fulfill some great destiny in their lifetimes. *I believe there is also a heroine in each of our hearts waiting to come out.* Yet somewhere along the pathway of our lives, we lose our innocence, forget our dreams, and succumb to a life filled with monotony and responsibility. I remember pondering this very thought when I was a young wife and mother feeling “stuck” at a particular moment. I wondered how I had gotten there, since I had always hoped to do something of significance.

As a young adult, mission work had taken me to many exciting cities. I had moved to Communist countries throughout Eastern Europe, meeting secretly with people to teach them the truths of the Bible and to train them to share faith in their own countries.

As a single missionary, I lived in Vienna, Krakow, and Warsaw. After Clay and I married, we moved to Vienna and then worked in Long Beach, Denver, and Nashville. Being a part of so many urban communities gave me a taste for city life. Having friends from many backgrounds and cultures brought me great pleasure and stimulation. A charming coffee shop was always just a fifteen-minute walk or drive away. We regularly dined at cafés and restaurants with international cuisine, but our lives were about to drastically change.

When our children were young, Clay and I began dreaming of starting a publishing company and family ministry. To fulfill that vision, we moved with our three oldest children, who were eleven, eight, and six, from Nashville to my mother-in-law’s house. Our new home was located in a tiny town of 712 people, forty-five minutes away from the nearest grocery store with fresh food or a loaf of whole grain bread.

Life in this tiny old town left me feeling disoriented and frustrated. The temperature surpassed one hundred degrees almost every day, and chiggers—those tiny bugs—chewed on my children and me every time we went outdoors, leaving countless itching bumps. The only place to shop was a little convenience store two miles away in town (and it smelled like grease from all the fried chicken sold there). We had no babysitters, no friends, not even a church or library—and the graduating class at the local school was seven in a good year. There was no coffee shop or café—and we didn't have money to afford eating out anyway. Paying for groceries, clothing, and doctors' bills devoured our small income. Goodwill and secondhand stores were my only shopping options, and then only if we had a few dollars left at the end of the month and could make the long drive to a bigger town.

My mother-in-law's house was laid out in such a way that our kids could make a circular path through it—starting in the living room, going through our bedroom, then continuing through the hallway to the kitchen, and finally reaching the living room again. Round and round they would run! One day, not long before I had my fourth child, I was sitting on the floor of our bedroom in front of a small couch. I guess I was hidden from the children's view because when they ran their standard route, they came in one door and went out the other while calling, "Mama, Mama, where are you?"

When I realized they couldn't see me, but only the back of the couch, I did not answer. There I was, an adult in my early forties, hiding behind the couch and hoping my children would not find me. As I sat on the floor, I was Eeyore living under clouds of "Woe is me."

My mind scanned the past year and came up with a number of disturbing memories: my two miscarriages (one in which I had almost died); the packed boxes and messes all around us; our regular encounters with spiders or snakes; a mother-in-law who hovered and followed me around the house as I worked and cooked; three kids who would not go outside and play in the scorching heat; and the squishy squash bugs on our outside plants in what was supposed to be my

country garden. On top of that, I had no nearby friends or support systems and, did I mention, no strong cup of coffee?

More thoughts came: My family wanted to eat so often, and they made so many messes every day. This was not at all how I'd envisioned my life. I considered myself a professional, adult sort of person, not a pregnant forty-two-year-old mama with secondhand clothes who was throwing up and sweating through life with children and messes all around me.

In that moment, my life was a pile of puzzle pieces, all mixed up with no seeming pattern or logical way to fit them together. And a heroine was not to be found in the picture. As I scrutinized the landscape of my soul, I saw endless darkness down a gloomy hallway that seemed to end in despair. Nothing in my life seemed to be matching up with my ideals; I was physically, spiritually, and emotionally drained, and everyone and everything depended on my keeping it all together. This place was as far from an adventure requiring heroism as I could imagine.

Add to that, a number of critics waited in line to freely voice their opinions to Clay and me.

"Have you lost your mind, moving to such a tiny town? Are you sure this is where you are supposed to be?"

"Ninety-five percent of all new businesses fail the first year, and they end up bankrupt!"

"What experience do you have in publishing? I thought the real publishers already rejected your book ideas—what makes you think you can publish them yourselves and find anyone who wants to hear what you have to say?"

Then there were the warnings from family—"You know, someday you are going to have to get a job that pays real money. You can't just fiddle around your whole life. You need to think of your children and how you are raising them!"

And "After three miscarriages—one you almost died from—you are pregnant again? You are tempting fate. If something more serious happens, it will be your own fault."

“I think it is fine if you homeschool your children when they are young because you can’t mess them up too badly. But what about when they’re older? What will you do then about your children’s education when the nearest big school is in another county, miles and miles away? And have you considered that they won’t get the socialization they need?”

It was while juggling these pressures on our marriage, finances, spiritual life, family life, and ideals that I felt breathless with fear and insecurity as I hid behind that couch. It was then that I had a big “come to Jesus meeting.”

Tears flowed down my face uncontrollably. Miraculously, no one found me.

“God,” I whispered, “I have served you faithfully for many years. What am I doing here? Life is so hard. This place doesn’t suit my personality. And my mother-in-law is no Naomi. Does it really matter that I have served you as best I know how all of these years? How can any good come out of these circumstances? I don’t think I can make it here. Please take me out of this situation.”

Escape. That was my first line of defense when I was in this very rough place. Where could I go to get away from these problems?

Looking back, I realize my response was pretty typical. We live in a culture of runaways—rushing to another marriage, job, house, Internet thrill, vacation, drug, whatever. Yet when we run away all the time, our “demons”—the problems, difficult relationships, scars, fears, insecurity, selfishness—seem to follow us. Ironically, the very difficulties we want to escape can be overcome only when we face them head-on. Otherwise, they have a way of following us wherever we go. Not only that, but running away from them keeps us from growing stronger and eventually becoming heroes in our own stories.

After I said my brief prayer and spilled all my tears, quietness came. The sun was setting outside and cast soft shadows in our room. Finally, the kids had gone outside to play with the dogs.

The comfort of God’s Spirit gently began to blow through me, as I was finally ready to open my heart in humility and prayer. A little

song my children had been listening to pressed upon my mind: “This is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.”

This day, this place, these circumstances—God had made them!

The Lord seemed to speak to me from all the devotions I had been having with my little ones, and a verse came to my mind: “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to

those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Hebrews 12:11).

***The very difficulties we want to escape can be overcome only when we face them head-on.***

The words that captured my attention were “those who have been trained by it.” Training is something

that is repeated again and again over a long period of time, in order to build strength and endurance. God wanted to train me in holiness right where I was, in these circumstances.

Then I felt Him impress the following on my heart: *Sally, this is the place I want you to worship Me. Being faithful in these circumstances is where you will find the glory of My favor. This is exactly where I want you. This time of testing will be the making of your faith, the humbling of your heart, the shaping of your character, the writing of your story. You can choose to waste this time with a bad attitude, to leave this situation, or to waste your days in ungratefulness and complaints. And then your life will continue moving through darkness and dim hallways.*

*You have a choice to make: If you trust Me and live faithfully in this juncture, I will make this a place of favor and honor for you. But if you look for a way out and disqualify yourself from the blessings and favor I had planned to give you, you will find yourself in the midst of a prolonged wilderness.*

And so the itchy, green shag carpet behind the tiny, worn loveseat that hid me from view became an altar of worship for me. *Lord, I will choose to find light in this darkness. I have no guarantee about how any of this will turn out, but I am planting a flag of faith. No matter what happens, I will be as obedient as I can to bring joy into this place, to create beauty in this wilderness, to exercise generous love, and to persevere*

*with patience. I will choose to believe that wherever You are my faithful companion is the place where Your blessing will be upon me.*

Peace clothed me like an embrace from God. I had been tested and had come through with grace. This was only one of many dark and difficult junctures on my life pathway, and yet I was now learning to ask at each turn in the road, “What is the lesson here, God? What wisdom can I learn? How can I bring grace, beauty, and order to each day, and live as though it is a place of worship?”

Later that evening, I committed my thoughts to my journal, writing down life goals that would help determine the kind of woman I would become in the years ahead. I resolved:

to be a joyful person  
 to practice being thankful  
 to see God’s fingerprints each day of my life, as I knew my  
     children probably longed to have a happy mother  
 to live every day by faith, choosing to believe that God was real,  
     that He listened to prayer, and that He would provide the  
     grace to get through every trial  
 to love, as much as possible, all of those who came into my life

Finally, I committed to work hard and to grow in strength, as I was beginning to understand that living up to these ideals would require a lifetime of working, cooking, cleaning, writing, living, teaching, and speaking.

### **Reflecting on Sixty Years of Walking with God**

Hindsight does indeed bring great insight. Though there are some images I’d still rather forget from that time—such as the scorpion that fell from the ceiling and stung me on the thigh when I was 9½ months pregnant (and even then the baby would not come!). And yet it was in that remote house in a tiny town that my children learned to love the country, living wild and free in the place I first thought

cursed. The time with fewer friends, distractions, and lessons, though often lonely, drew our family circle closer together than ever would have happened if we had been in a large city with limitless choices.

My marriage grew stronger because I was forced to be less selfish and to believe in the dreams of my husband. My compassion for those who were lonely, who lived on little income, and who were forced to overcome seemingly impossible circumstances grew out of the humility that developed as I waited on God in faith. My ministry messages grew out of my life experiences.

These were the memories I pondered as I sipped the warm cup of tea my daughter Joy brought me on the morning of my sixtieth birthday. Her instructions as she met me coming down the stairs from my bedroom had been, “Mom, we have a whole day of celebration prepared for you. But I want to give you a few minutes alone first while we finish cooking breakfast so you can ponder all those sixty years. That way we can hear the stories and celebrate all the meaningful days with you today!”

And so I did take some time to sift through my memories. As I wrote in the introduction, I had been challenged early in life to live every day as though it were my last. Now I asked myself, *Have I lived into the spiritual reality of the God who brought me to Himself? Have I written a story of faith and faithfulness that will speak inspiration to generations to come?*

As I reflected on the years, the first inklings of the thoughts that led me to write this book developed. I realized that God had been faithful and that I had lived a life sprinkled with His favor, miracles, and blessing. I wanted to share, from a perspective of deep gratefulness and gathered wisdom, some of the spiritual secrets I had learned about how to live a flourishing life.

I also had come to understand and appreciate the ways God had taught me. Many of the years I spent serving Him with my whole heart had been invisible to the public. I had not lived a perfect life. At times, I resisted the very pressures that God wanted to use to train me to become strong. But I could see that when I yielded to His ways

and lived with His hand holding mine, my life story had become more than I could ever have imagined.

I know now that heroes come with a variety of stories. A radical life for Christ is not always visible to outside eyes. Even Jesus lived in a tiny town, never venturing more than fifty miles from His home during His ministry. Though He did not work with great world leaders and was obscure in His commonness, Christ's love and service literally changed the history of the world. So many of my own years had been poured into the mundane moments of life, yet I sought to make each one a celebration of His reality.

Through seventeen moves (six international), car accidents, illnesses, church splits, seven pregnancies, three miscarriages, four children, and even a house fire, life had indeed been an adventure. God had been my companion throughout, and He had enabled me to emerge with a legacy of His faithfulness.

My sixty years had been sprinkled with small miracles, hard work, endless days of faith through the darkness, and so many moments of pleasure and deep blessings of love. I thought of my marriage of thirty-three years, and how my husband and I had come to understand the real meaning of love and commitment. The hard work of our marriage had shaped each of us, one humble day after the other, to become more understanding, more accepting, more thankful for each other than we ever could have been when we started. Of course our lives had been fraught with the pettiness of our own selfishness and, at times, loneliness, and yet we had persevered and made it through the years with such a meaningful heritage of family.

***A radical life for Christ is not always visible to outside eyes.***

What a blessing to have dreamed together about becoming message makers to strengthen families. After thousands of hours of work, we had built a ministry together, written a number of books, started a publishing house, and seen our books translated into eight languages.

And what a miracle to have been able to parent, having no

experience with children and no natural patience for all the work it required. We had not only faced the challenges of living in a remote location but had also faced severe bouts of asthma, OCD, learning challenges, and all the difficulties that naturally come as a result of children's inherent selfishness. Yet thirty years into parenting, I rejoiced as I thought about my children: four vibrant, beautiful adults who cared about life, loved us, and were committed to faithfully serving God.

The grid through which I had lived my life was based on my understanding that in order to live a flourishing life of influence, I had to own my life—to take responsibility for my choices, attitude, will, and actions, knowing they would all have consequences for eternity. Once I understood that my integrity was built when no one but Christ was looking, I was motivated to remain faithful in moments alone with Him and my Bible.

The moment so many years ago in our bedroom at my mother-in-law's house, when I had felt trapped in the wilderness of life, had been a turning point. The desert years, in fact, had become the deepest blessing of my life.

There I learned that life was not about my ease, but about God's desire to help me become mature. He wanted to take from my hands the very things I was holding on to for security so that I could find lasting happiness in the simple things that could never be lost—the breathtaking beauty of a wilderness sunset; the contentment that my children learned from having few toys and only the open land in which to pretend and play; the soul-satisfying relationships that develop in a family who have only one another to rely on; and the gratification that comes from learning to be happy apart from material possessions.

Perhaps most important, I discovered that heroes are made during the secret moments. Though they practice faith, integrity, and courage when no one else is there to see, at the right time, they will come out of spiritual “basic training” with the integrity and action required to accomplish something great.

## Putting Together the Pieces of Your Unique Life Puzzle

Each of us has a different life puzzle to assemble. The choices you make in the midst of your life journey do have eternal consequences. Yes, you can throw the pieces at God in anger and say, “I do not like the life You have given me, and I refuse to live within these limitations with a humble heart. You have made me a victim. You have ruined my life. I will choose to live in darkness.” If that is your choice, the puzzle of your life will remain fragmented and separated, with holes in the picture.

However, if you choose to bow your knee and submit to the varied circumstances of your life, God will do miracles. If you choose to trust and develop your integrity and an inner standard of holiness that isn’t dependent on cultural standards, the puzzle pieces will begin to come together. No matter what your limitations are—health issues, financial problems, a difficult marriage or divorce, a loss of friendship, death of a dream—your life is meant to be filled to the brim with the potential of God’s blessings. But in order to thrive and heal, you must accept any limitations by faith, trust in His faithfulness each step of the way, and wait for His grace so you can live a faithful story right in the place you find yourself.

If you embrace your unique puzzle of life, you will find wholeness. As you look to God to slowly figure out how to put the pieces together, you will see a beautiful picture emerge. Your story lived faithfully will become your glory—the place where He builds messages, provides answers to prayer, and teaches wisdom.



## Own Your Part

I have a collection of teacups and mugs. Each is different in size, shape, and color—but every one of them is functional and beloved by my family. In the same way, each of our lives is unique. Our differences do not devalue our intrinsic worth, but they do create a different design. I have always told my children, “You might as well

decide to like God's will for your life, since your circumstances are probably not going to change just because you wish they would."

1. What defines and makes your life distinct? What resources do you have? What do you consider to be advantages to your particular puzzle? Are there any areas that seem impossible at this moment that you need to put into God's hands?

We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. ROMANS 8:28

How does the verse above apply to your own life right now?

2. Learning to see each turn in the road and each unique circumstance as a part of what God has ordained has helped me find purpose at each juncture. I ask Him, *Lord, what can I learn from this? What message at this moment might prepare me to encourage someone in the same circumstances later? Show me Your faithfulness now so I can keep learning.*

Trust in the LORD and do good;  
Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness. PSALM 37:3

This verse has helped me learn to stay in the moment and grow where I am. How is God asking you to be faithful wherever you are today? What does it mean to cultivate faithfulness?

### ***Praying with You***

Lord, each of us finds challenges in each season of our lives. Help us today to cultivate faithfulness right where we are. Give us the spiritual eyes to believe that You will work this situation out for our good. We come in Jesus' name. Amen.