

You are Loved

Lessons About Life and God's Love I Have
Discovered as a Stepdad

Jimmy Akers

First

Jimmy Akers

Chapters

Five

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From the Author

Also by Jimmy Akers

Foreword

I DID NOT KNOW if I would ever get the opportunity to be a biological father but being a stepdad has been incredibly transformational in so many ways. As I started to learn and see God at work through the kid in our house, I started taking notes. Whenever I feel like God is speaking or trying to show me something, I take notes! This book comes from some of those notes.

I hope these words are an encouragement to you in some capacity, regardless of where you are in life. I dedicate these words to the kid in our house, and to you. I'm not just writing to say I did. I'm writing because my life and experiences are not just for me. If I am going to go through it, I hope to grow through it and help others do the same.

JIMMY AKERS

You are worth the investment that it took to write, edit, and publish this book.

You are loved. I used this for the title of this book because it is full of lessons about life and God's love I have discovered as a stepdad.

For almost seven years' worth of Saturday nights, my band would play at Joe's Place in Baltimore, Maryland, and I would hear Shannon Lewis speak life over people in just a few words. Whether there were twenty people in the room or two hundred, every Saturday night he would say... You are loved.

You are valued.

God has a destiny for your life.

Eventually those words took root in my own life. They are true. I don't have to know your pain to know it's real. I've had my own. But God's love for you and plan for you has not changed. Jesus is not finished with your story. You are loved.

-jimmy

Chapter One

I see you. I hear you.

I'VE ALWAYS HAD A deep desire to know I am loved. In fact, that seems to be true for most of us. But nobody quite shows the need and desire for this better than kids!

A child will go out of his or her way to get your attention. Through years of working with kids and from observing the kid in our house, I've noticed a child will go as far as intentionally getting in trouble so they can feel seen and heard. That seems crazy, but even if the attention is bad, it usually works.

Maybe the desire to be seen and heard comes from God to keep us dependent on something and somebody bigger than ourselves. I cannot say that for sure, but I do know I am seen and heard by God.

Now, I have not always been convinced of that, and most of my conversations with other people reveal most other people are not either. That's why this matters, and why your reading this matters.

Whether you see how, or feel it's true, or fully understand why, you are loved. In fact, before you ever even had a chance to wrap your head around what you needed or wanted in life, God knew He wanted you and created you to do incredible things. He loves you so much that He chose to love you first!

I will share stories and analogies throughout this book, and I will also share scriptures from the Bible, because those words speak truth in a way I can't.

Jeremiah 1:5 reminds us that before we were formed in our mother's womb, God knew us. And 1 John 4:19 says that we love, and we get to love, because God loved us first.

The kid in our house is my stepson. I will share more about why that distinction is important to me in the next chapter, but there is a reason that

him being my stepson is important for you to know. It's important because he has a biological father and mother who I respect and show honor to. But as his mom often says, I get to be a bonus dad. I get to.

The beauty of that for me is being a bonus dad does not make my attention or love for him any less important. I mean, Jesus had a stepdad and Joseph made it into His story! I think it is a great way to teach about God's love for us. God did not just create us, He chose to love us first. When I first started dating his mom, I knew my stepson was a part of the package, and I had a choice to make.

While I am thoroughly convinced that God chose me for this role, I also got to choose. I am so thankful God said yes when He brought this opportunity into my life, and I recognize how much it has changed my life for the better every day I show up to be present as a stepdad.

I will never forget the first time the kid in our house gave me an image that tangibly showed the significance I had in his life. A few months after his mom and I started dating, I came over for din-

ner and he brought me a picture he had drawn. It had three stick figures on it. I asked him who they were, and he pointed out with excitement that it was his mom, him, and me. I made it in his picture, literally! Side note: literally was one of his favorite words for a while, but his version had fewer syllables.

The kid in that moment made me feel loved. That picture made me feel seen and heard—but not just by him. God knew I needed that. God knew a desire of my heart was to have a chance to positively impact kids and hopefully one day be a father. As a child I had so many struggles tied to my identity and self-esteem, so I wanted to help others feel seen and heard somehow, especially kids!

God saw me. God heard me. And Jesus used a little kid in that house on that night in that moment during that season of my life to teach me and show me God's love for me.

God knew you before you graced this big ball we call Earth with your presence. He chose to love you first. And the same words I heard God whis-

per to me that night at the kitchen table are just as much true for you today as they were for me then. You don't have to perform well or make all the right decisions to earn His attention. You are loved!

You reading this book matters because, if not before this moment, we are now meeting at this intersection, my dear friend. But even better, God is meeting you right here, right now in this season of your life. And as you read these words you need to know God is also saying to you...

I see you. I hear you. You are loved.

Chapter Two

Nothing is wasted.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT childhood lessons have stuck with you, but one I am reminded about almost every day came from my grandmother, or Gram, as we called her. One morning after spending the night at my grandparents' house, I was tasked with the responsibility of making toast while Gram finished cooking the rest of our breakfast.

A few slices of bread in, I noticed a small, dark spot on the corner of one of the slices. Upon further inspection I realized it was mold. So I did what I think most people would do! I headed toward the trash can to throw it away, but I was suddenly stopped in my tracks. Gram stepped in front of me, grabbed the slice of bread out of my hand, and headed back toward the counter.

Gram cut that slice of bread in half and threw away the side with the mold and kept the other side. She also put that piece on her plate. Gram went on to explain how there are people who don't have anything to eat, and we were not going to waste food, especially the good part of it. In that conversation she also helped me realize that even when something goes bad, there may still be some parts of it that can be redeemed.

It's important to note that my grandmother grew up poor and there were many days during her childhood when she didn't have anything to eat. This conviction for her went way deeper than saving a few cents on a slice of bread.

One of the reasons that God blessing me with the opportunity to be a stepdad is important is because at least up until the writing of these words, infertility has been a part of my story. My reality after years of trying, praying, crying, and hoping to be a biological father one day was finally at an impasse after several difficult tests and conversations with doctors.

Some people questioned my faith and my ability to believe and trust God when I shared about my infertility. But for me, processing my reality and sharing my story was not a lack of faith. In fact, I believe it points to my faith in Jesus holding up even when things don't go how I want or hoped for at the time. It also gives me the opportunity to encourage others who struggle with similar stories.

When I was transitioning roles at the mission I serve with a few years ago, the Lord spoke something to me. As I was having a conversation with my soon-to-be director about moving from my role in missionary care under human resources to be an advocate and storyteller for kids in Kenya through Child Sponsorship, the words your infertility will not be wasted came out of nowhere. I spent the rest of the day praying and processing that.

Your infertility will not be wasted.

At the time I was a new stepfather, moving into my advocate role for child sponsorship, stepping in to lead our children's ministry when our

church needed it, and helping with chapel services for our church's preschool. What I realized that day is that God strategically positioned me into a season of life that forced me to deal with the pain, fear, loss, and disappointment associated with my infertility head on.

All those roles were important, but that intersection did not come quietly or in a way I could just tiptoe at the edge of the water where it gently met the sand on beach. It felt like God threw me into the deep end where the waves were intense, and I had no choice but to sink or swim.

Even though it was difficult, that lesson from Gram and the bread—teaching me about something good still being redeemed when something went bad—came to mind. My infertility has not been wasted.

Now, I fully trust and believe God can perform a miracle in my body. And if He does, that will be a book all in itself! But I think the redemption in this part of my story comes from the pain and loss being used by God, because this is not just about me.

Romans 8:28 reminds us that all things work together for the good of those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose. If we are not careful, we will misread that. It says all things work together for the good, not that all things are good. God often uses the difficulties in life to get us to the good stuff. That's where redemption comes into play!

God will take the messes in our lives and use them as messages to encourage someone else in his or her journey! There are times when God will use the pain and the process that we go through toward healing to bring His promises to fruition.

Sometimes when I look at the kid in our house, I recognize the physical traits he has from his mom and dad. But because of God doing His best work with broken people, now I also recognize that while he might not share my DNA, he can still grow into a man who loves God and others well, hopefully from the example I set.

He can become a man of integrity and respect who works hard to provide for his future family and bless others abundantly because of the char-

acter I get to help craft alongside his biological parents and the faithful God we serve.

If you find yourself in a difficult season or if you are processing the pain and loss from a disappointment, you are not alone. My grandmother and the kid in our house taught me that even when answered prayers don't look how we expected or show up in our anticipated timeline...

Nothing is wasted. You are loved.

Chapter Three

Fill in the blank.

LIFE DOES NOT ALWAYS fit our desired narrative. I am writing this chapter in the late fall of 2020 while we as a world are still dealing with the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. This year more than ever before was not in any capacity a part of our New Year hopes and dreams! The pastor who said 2020 would be my year done told a lie!

Nobody on New Year's Eve said, "I need to stock up on toilet paper before the shelves are bare in March!" Nobody said, "I need to stock up on face masks." On top of the disruptions for many regarding their health, jobs, and travel, school was another thing that got jacked up.

Thankfully, my wife had a few weeks of working from home when our state first shut down and schools were closed, but then it was my turn.

I thank God for the flexibility in the two jobs I have, but suddenly I had to learn how to teach the kid in our house from home with the help of emails and a computer while still working and navigating an incredibly stressful season of life.

It has been a difficult year for everyone, and all of a sudden, the C- student who struggled to make it through school himself was forced to help a then six-year-old who was processing all the changes in the world at the same time, on top of doing his schoolwork! It was overwhelming to say the least.

But it helped me realize that sometimes we don't get a choice of when we must close the gap and meet the need. As I tried to help the kid in our house fill in the blanks, I had to learn how to be a fill-in-the-blank.

Sometimes we don't like the tension those blanks create, and we try to rush and fill them with the wrong things. I've done that too! But I'm so thankful that when there is a gap in our life, God

knows what we need more than we do. If we trust Him, He will meet the need, somehow and in some way. Isaiah 55:8 reminds us that God's ways are higher than our ways.

One of the things I try to remind the kid in our house is how what he brings to the table is important. We are not just trying to raise a good kid! We are trying to raise an awesome human being who will make incredible contributions in the world and positively impact the lives of everyone around him.

Sometimes there is a gap. We need to trust God to fill that space with the best option. But sometimes it's us. It might be your turn to...

Fill in the blank. You are loved.

Chapter Four

Do the right thing—regardless.

KIDS ARE SPONGES! THE truth is, more is caught than what is taught. Occasionally something will come out of nowhere from the kid in our house and we must learn how to navigate it, address it, and correct his course if necessary. But this is true with good and bad things. Here is one good example we experienced.

Who likes traffic? Nobody! Most traffic delays are caused by accidents, and sometimes those accidents move from fender benders to tragic quickly. I have only been in two accidents, and they both looked way worse than they could have been. In the first one, I was rear ended by a driver who was not paying attention when traffic stopped, and she was driving at least fifty-five miles per hour. The

other accident involved someone who ran a red light and hit me almost head on.

In both accidents, my cars were totaled, and I walked away from both scenes with a few bruises and soreness. But on top of being traumatic events, those accidents were inconvenient for the other drivers around us. No doubt some got frustrated sitting in the traffic because of accidents that didn't involve them.

Driving with the kid in our house in the back-seat has helped me learn how to slow down my response and to keep traffic delays in proper perspective. Yes, running behind is inconvenient, but we were safe.

As I thought more about this, I began to pray out loud whenever we'd hear sirens or see first responding vehicles. I would pray for the situation at hand. My wife and I would encourage him to pray too, but he never said anything. When he asked why we prayed the first few times, I explained it was the right thing to do.

Then one day it happened.

We were driving and heard sirens, but I was looking at the GPS and did not respond as quickly as normal when I heard a little voice in the back seat pipe up.

“Dear God, please touch that situation and everyone involved. Amen.”

Unprompted when I hesitated to speak up, the then six-year-old in the back seat prayed a prayer of faith that no doubt shook heaven in that moment! His mom and I both teared up because that value we’d worked to instill in him got played out right in front of us in real time. He did the right thing regardless of what we were doing. It was amazing!

But this must also be lived out when it’s hard. A pandemic during an election year here in the United States made it difficult at times to want to do the right thing. Overwhelming circumstances and leadership decisions made by our government officials that we did not always agree with made it difficult to always do the right thing.

On top of that, the normal stresses of life were still in play. And if you are not aware, co-parenting can create its own challenges kids need to learn

how to process. I experienced this full force as a teenager when my parents divorced. But more is caught than is taught.

Then God's Word speaks to us about this. Romans 12:21 reminds us to not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. Colossians 3:17 tells us that whatever we do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus. That is clear.

Kids are more capable and flexible than we give them credit for. Did I mention they are sponges and soak up the good and the bad? We can't always control our circumstances, but we can choose how we respond.

The day the kid in our house prayed for those impacted by the emergency on the road reminds us that it's always the right time to do the right thing. Even when others don't respond the way we want, or circumstances are less than ideal...

Do the right thing—regardless. You are loved.

Chapter Five

Blue Fish Two

AT ONE POINT THE kid in our house wanted a pet. We told him we would go that route eventually, but he had to prove he could take care of it. So we landed on getting a Beta fish. They are simple, low maintenance, and live long compared to some other options. We went to the pet store and got all we needed, including the fish and instructions for its care.

Because of the fish's distinct color, my stepson named it Blue. He's a simple man! We encouraged another name, but he stuck to it.

Day one was good, but at some point during day two, Blue went south and seemed to be slowing down. I called the pet store and followed their recommendations, but the next morning we found

Blue floating in a no-longer-living fish-like position and had to call the time of death. R.I.P., Blue.

The problem was that our boy woke up shortly after we found Blue and came into the kitchen promptly to make sure he fed him. Responsibility! He noticed Blue floating on his side and said that it was clear that Blue stayed up too late and was taking a nap. We just stood there and held our breath as we tried to figure this out.

Later that day I went back to the store to replace Blue before my stepson got home from school. It's not that we wanted to cover up this loss, but the boy's fish died forty-eight hours in! We needed to try again. I found the closest looking Beta to Blue and went home.

My stepson recognized right away that Blue was awake, energetic, and even had a tan! There was clearly more black on Blue Two, but we went with it. Unfortunately Blue Two did not make it through the night and we told the boy the full story in the morning.

Now, we are not fish haters and really wanted the Beta fish to work out. After the unfortunate

passing of Blue Two, another pet store revealed that solution we'd gotten to treat the bad water at our house was the wrong one from the start. Man!

The boy decided he needed a break from the fish idea after a traumatic week's loss of two fish. We agreed.

That night I thought about how much effort we'd put into trying to prevent my stepson from feeling the pain of loss. The ten-dollar fish replacement was not too much, but quite a bit of time, conversations, and energy went into trying to keep the kid in our house from pain. And in the end, we still couldn't.

It felt traumatic at the time, but Blue One and Blue Two have not come up much in conversation. So much emotion and energy wrapped up in the loss of two ten-dollar fish. Again, I'm a fan of Nemo and I believe the water is one of the most life-giving gifts God has blessed us with! It's sad that bad information from the pet store cut their lives short. But it still blows my mind about how emotional I got over the thought of our then six-year-old experiencing this loss.

How much more does God care for us? Matthew 7:11 reminds us that we fall short even with our best effort, but how much more our Heavenly Father gives good gifts to those who ask Him.

One thing I felt was necessary after we revealed that Blue Two died was we prayed and thanked God for the life of these two fish. God loves you even more and will go way further than we ever could, even with...

Blue Fish Two. You are loved.

From the Author

THIS IS JUST THE beginning of what I am learning about life and God's love from being a stepdad, but I had to start somewhere. If this book was helpful at all, I would love for you to go on Amazon and write a review. Then send me a message to let me know your thoughts!

And if you want to know how you can change a child's life in Jesus' name, let me know. Visit dontdolifealone.com or email me at whygoalone@gmail.com. I'd love to hear from you! God is not finished with your story, my dear friend.

You are loved.

-jimmy

Also by Jimmy Akers

Don't
Do
Life
Alone*DEVO

365 HOPE-FILLED DEVOTIONS TO HELP
YOU CONSISTENTLY DRAW CLOSER TO
JESUS AND GROW IN YOUR FAITH DAILY

JIMMY AKERS

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THANKFUL
Gratitude Changes Everything



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*"...a simple key that can open the door to the life we dream of..." - Dan Miller
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