

MEGAN FATE MARSHMAN



MEANT
FOR
GOOD

THE **ADVENTURE** OF TRUSTING GOD
& HIS PLANS FOR YOU



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MEGAN FATE MARSHMAN

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Meant for Good

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PROLOGUE

GOD'S PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE

Let me start this book with a wholehearted welcome. Gut-honest truth, I'm thrilled you're with me on this ride! I would only write this stuff down if it had changed my own life in worthwhile ways.

Here's what you can expect: in the pages of this book, you'll be deeply challenged and convicted by Jesus's example. You'll be inspired by stories both biblical and personal. And you'll be equipped with practical, life-changing truths.

In this book, we'll be studying Jeremiah 29:11-14. Yes, everyone loves Jeremiah 29:11, and we'll talk about that. But let's not forget that this favorite verse has a context and consequences. There's so much more to unpack.

Before we get into it, though, I want to tell you something. This is important. I want to share this with you as delicately and urgently as I believe God would communicate it to you Himself: *You can trust God's plans for your life.*

Maybe that statement takes you aback. Maybe it makes

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you want to close the book. Maybe you're thinking, *Megan doesn't know me, or my life, and if she did, she wouldn't suggest something like that because the life I'm living doesn't feel like a plan God would write.* Well, here's the deal. If you find that hard to believe, you are in *exactly* the right place. This book will offer a way for you to come to believe those words, to embrace the unknown they offer, and to do so joyfully, amidst all the real difficulties you're facing.

You can trust God's plans even though you don't yet know what they are. You can trust them even if nothing in your life looks good. You can trust His plans for you because even though His plans may not be what you expected, they're good, because *He is good*, in ways we can only begin to understand.

When that truth settles into our hearts, we can live in trust and active dependence on Him. This book will teach you how. Plus, that kind of life is going to go way, way beyond your expectations. Don't believe me? Good. I have about two hundred pages to convince you.

Come on, my friend, we have a wonderful road ahead.

PART 1

*“For I know the plans I have for you,”
declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you
and not to harm you, plans to give you
hope and a future.”*

—Jeremiah 29:11

CHAPTER 1

VOW OF SILENCE

“For I know the plans *I have for you,”*
declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and
not to harm you, plans to give you hope and
a future.”



God knows the plans, but He’s not planning
to tell them to us.

When I was a professor at Azusa Pacific University, I had the honor of teaching an 8 a.m. class on Monday mornings. *Bleh.* I was more awake than the students were, but not by much. We all needed a little help to get class launched.

To warm up the classroom, I asked my students if anyone had done anything interesting over the weekend. There were typically one or two stories about hastily planned road trips, surprise birthday parties, or dorm life pranks. Every now and again, though, somebody went off the map.

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“I took a vow of silence,” a student boasted one Monday. He told the class how he refused to talk the entire weekend. He navigated his forty-eight hours with gestures and meaningful head nods, and, when he got desperate, he used pen and paper. He wrapped up his story and challenged me, “You should try it!”

I grinned and mouthed, *Okay*.

I’m always up for a challenge. Even at 8 a.m. on a Monday morning. At first no one believed it. After a quiet minute, the students shifted awkwardly in their seats. Another minute passed and I still didn’t say anything. The room crackled with nervous energy. I heard one of the students whisper, “No, wait, she can’t be serious. She’s the teacher!”

I was serious. In Elvis fashion, my voice had left the building.

My students assumed, like many of us do, that in order to teach, professors need to profess. Silence was not in my job description. At first, they didn’t trust me. I could see it on some of those groggy faces—this was going to be a waste of their time. They worried that my spontaneous challenge would interrupt that day’s plans, that their time spent with me would be pointless because I wasn’t going to play the part they expected me to play. They wanted the answers delivered nice and tidy in a PowerPoint presentation. Don’t we all?

But as I stood there in front of the class, the focus of their confused expressions, I played with the realization that I could teach just as well if I *listened* and *invited* my students to trust me. We could explore the lesson in a new way, gathering answers together. I took on a new role, so my students had to take on a new role too. They would have to become the initiators. Talk about a learning experience!

One student asked, “Well, like, did anyone do the reading?”

To my chagrin, only a smattering of students raised their hands. At least they were honest. I rolled my eyes; the students chuckled.

I gestured for one of my responsible students to come to the front and set him up with my lesson slides. Shifting his feet behind the lectern, he raised an eyebrow at me.

“You sure about this?” he asked.

I gave him an encouraging nod.

“Here goes nothin’.”

He clicked on the first slide and the lesson began. It was evident he had at least skimmed the reading assignment as he walked the class through what he could remember. As we went along, other students jumped in on the action. Students I had seen sleep through the class before started participating. They shared their thoughts and opinions. They disagreed politely, asking each other for evidence from the text. They even opened their textbooks in class. Imagine that!

I was no longer Professor Marshman: Purveyor of Answers; instead, I became the guide on the journey to the students’ discovery. If the students were missing concepts by inches, I typed out a clue or a question on the screen for the class to see. The lesson plan for my Health and Wellness class that day was to discover what it meant to be healthy. In order to be wholly healthy, we had to consider every spiritual, emotional, mental, physical, and social part of our beings. We couldn’t just focus on one. I mean, if you look good in spandex but have no friends, are you truly healthy?

My students started spouting off their thoughts and found themselves on a rabbit trail of opinions. As their opinions

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piled up, I would bring them back to the textbook. But I didn't give them the answers. Instead, I offered questions or pointed them back to the true expert on the subject.¹ I stepped to their side and accompanied them on their journey.

On my drive home, I couldn't help but think about how awesome that 8 a.m. class had turned out. It was a far cry from what I'd originally planned, but the students actually enjoyed it. Their engagement with the content was off the charts! For the first time in my teaching career, I had confidence that each student had grasped and discovered the day's lesson plan. They were still talking about wanting to live healthy as they walked out of class.

"God, I wish everything was taught that way. Even church!"

And then it hit me, *hard*.

Professor God

I realized that, up until that day, I had approached my relationship with God like He was the teacher and I was the student. I had a whole list of assumptions about His role and my role. My role went something like this: I went to church, sat in a pew, took out my notebook, and got ready to jot down the answers for my life's problems. Professor God's role was to give me answers, in a more or less immediate fashion. And when I didn't hear those answers packaged nicely in an entertaining and inspirational way, I felt despondent, or worse, apathetic. I felt tempted to give Professor God a bad semester review.

I think most of us assume God is the teacher at the front of the classroom. According to us, He should dish out answers

and lesson plans, or rather, life plans, all tailored to our individual expectations. And when the answers don't arrive in the form we expect, or don't arrive at all, we think something is wrong with us or our teacher. But God is so much more than an answer giver. He's our guide for life's journey, the one who walks beside us—in our messes with us—helping us to see exactly what we need, when we need it.

Doling out answers and pitch-perfect plans is not God's teaching style. Instead, He's more into the Socratic method, "a cooperative dialogue between individuals, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presuppositions."² In fact, Jesus much preferred questions to answers. Here is just a sampling of the penetrating questions Jesus asked:

- Can any one of you, by worrying, add a single hour to your life? (Matthew 6:27)
- Why are you anxious? (Matthew 6:28 NAB)
- Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye? (Matthew 7:3 NAB)
- Why are you so afraid? (Matthew 8:26)
- Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? (Matthew 9:4)
- Do you believe that I am able to do this? (Matthew 9:28)
- Why did you doubt? (Matthew 14:31)
- Who do you say I am? (Matthew 16:15)
- What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? (Matthew 16:26)
- What do you want me to do for you? (Matthew 20:32)

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- Why are you testing me? (Matthew 22:18 NAB)
- Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? (Mark 8:17-18)
- What are you thinking in your hearts? (Luke 5:22 NAB)
- What good does it do for you to say I am your Lord and Master if what I teach you is not put into practice? (Luke 6:46 TPT)
- Where is your faith? (Luke 8:25)
- If even the smallest things are beyond your control, why are you anxious about the rest? (Luke 12:26 NAB)
- For who is greater: the one seated at the table or the one who serves? (Luke 22:27 NAB)
- Are you asleep? (Mark 14:37) Why are you sleeping? (Luke 22:46 NAB)
- What are you looking for? (John 1:38 NAB)
- What do you want? (John 1:38)
- Do you want to be well? (John 5:6 NAB)
- How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? (John 5:44)
- Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? (John 8:10)
- If I am telling you the truth, why don't you believe me? (John 8:46)
- Do you realize what I have done for you? (John 13:12 NAB)
- Have I been with you for so long and you still do not know me? (John 14:9 NAB)
- Do you love me? (John 21:16)

Overall, Jesus asked 307 questions Himself, and He was asked 183 questions, and of those He answered only three questions directly.³ The One who had the answer to every single question was less interested in giving the answers and more interested in getting people to engage with Him, listen, think, and respond. He was far more interested in relationship than dishing out answers.

Jesus is more interested in our *being* than in our *doing*. If it was just about doing, He would sit on our right shoulder all the time, whispering instructions to us. “Don’t touch that. Don’t go there. Smile at that person. Give that server a bigger tip. For My sake, don’t even think about it!”

But Jesus wants to capture our hearts, not program our hands and feet. He wants us to *become* the kind of people who, by instinct, want to *do* the right thing. He wants our doing to flow out of a being that has been shaped by nearness to Him. He wants us to draw close to Him and learn His heart. He wants us to internalize His values, so that we might, with His help, do as He would do.

All that to say, God cares about relationship.

Seeking God, Not Answers

Now, don’t get me wrong. God hasn’t taken a vow of silence, like I did. He does speak to us, much more frequently than we realize. Relationship requires communication, and He wants a relationship with us. He wants us to know Him. He longs for us to unveil His mysteries and discover more about His character. He wants us to delve into this marvelous and difficult world we live in, all of its complexities in tow. God wants to

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collaborate with us, even though He obviously does not need our help to run the universe.

My silence with my students invited them into deeper relationship with me because it forced them to trust my nudges. My silence opened the door for them to have a deeper understanding of the material they needed to learn. In the same way, God's silence about His "lesson plan of the day" forces us into a deeper relationship with Him as we seek His will. It forces us to examine our textbook (the Bible) more carefully, and to pay attention when through His Spirit He is nudging us toward an answer. Like the student on the receiving end of a brilliant Socratic dialogue, we may be ignorant and even stupid at first, but our wise God will lead us step-by-step to an answer that we seemingly discover for ourselves.

None of this is possible, however, if we don't seek God first. And if we are seeking God, we need to read His Word, which is the primary way He speaks to us. He has given us the gift of the Bible to reveal Himself to us. As we learn about Him, we also learn about ourselves, made in His image, and about the world that He has given us.

It's vital to maintain that order when reading the Bible: God and then us. We cannot start with ourselves, or we will inevitably distort the revelation of God in the Bible. We will make Him in *our* image rather than learn to reflect *His* image. If our highest goal is to know ourselves, the Bible is the wrong book. But if we seek to know God above all, we will come to know ourselves as well.

If we read the Bible and seek to know Him first, we give up control over the outcomes and the answers. We will find, more often than not, that the answers we get are not always

the answers we wanted. Because it's not about us and our limited perspectives on life, the universe, and everything in it. It's about Him: *His* perspective, *His* plan, *His* purposes.

While we want answers to life's questions from the One who has all of them (I mean, c'mon, He knows *everything*), I have a feeling He wants something else for us: relationship. We want answers and quick solutions to our problems; God wants trust.

Trusting God

If a trust in God is what God wants for us, there's got to be a good reason for it. Maybe His silence is just the invitation we need to seek Him.

What does that invitation look like for you? He may be asking you to trust Him with the unknowns, like your future. But what if you *need* to know the future? If we can't actively trust God with our future, we will never be free of our anxiety and fear. Perhaps God is inviting you to rely on His guidance in a difficult relationship. Maybe it's time to stop being content with everything being "fine" and surrender your entire life to the lordship of God.

You've probably heard this before: "When you ask God for patience, He'll give you an opportunity to exercise it." Cliché? Maybe. But it's true. Dwell on this for a minute. He doesn't just drop spiritual growth in our lap; He gives us a chance to put our faith into practice. Ironically, the difficulties we face in trusting God give us the opportunity to actually trust Him.

Is your mind spinning yet?

Which of your circumstances and challenges could be

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opportunities for you to trust Him? How can you grow in your trust in Him and His plans, right where you are, right in the midst of the trial, the waiting, or the fear?

That's not a shallow invitation. I have sat in waiting rooms too. I hate that they're even called that—waiting rooms. Those rooms that exist for us to wait while wondering about God's plans for us or our loved ones. In those waiting rooms of life, God is not silent. He is declaring, "I have plans. Will you trust Me? Will you see Me in everything?"

As we go through these pages together, we'll get to know the God who asks that question. God doesn't exempt us from worry or wondering. But He provides a location for worry and wondering to exist: in relationship with Him. Every desire we have for answers about our future draws us toward the conclusion that He uses all of it to deepen our trust in Him.

I Thought This Book Was about Jeremiah 29

It is.

While Jeremiah 29:11 quotes God telling other people about His plans for them, the next three verses are His invitation to trust Him (and to see His plans and His timing).

Not only does He invite people to trust Him, He specifies how. Jeremiah 29:11-14 provides us with what we need to develop a trusting relationship with God. Each chapter in this book will break down a portion of a verse, drawing on a whole swath of biblical teaching.

To begin, though, we need some context for Jeremiah 29. So let's look at that briefly.

The book of Jeremiah preserves an account of the

prophetic ministry of Jeremiah, whose ministry began in 626 BC and ended sometime after 586 BC.⁴ Here's the back story. The Jewish people disobeyed God. As a direct result of that disobedience, God sent them into exile to Babylon. Jeremiah revolves around this Babylonian exile.

In chapter 28 we meet Hananiah, who (falsely) prophesied a near future of peace for Israel, saying they'll be returning to Jerusalem within a few short years. This false prophet promised that their circumstances would get better, *and soon*. The problem was, things did not get better.

Today, we see Hananiahs all over the place, prophesying a similar message: *Everything will get better and easier with God*. No wonder people have pulled Jeremiah 29:11 out of its context. We want a hope-filled future with a dose of prosperity, but we don't want exile. We want to be faithful like Jesus, but we don't want to carry a cross. We want love without sacrifice, holiness without pain, and refinement without fire.

Jeremiah rebukes Hananiah and predicts his death in chapter 29. Yep, this is the same chapter that people use for the "hope and future" references iced on graduation cakes and pasted on greeting cards. Jeremiah goes on to tell the Israelites that their exile would continue. Relief would *eventually* come, but not quickly. In fact, it would take seventy more years. He encouraged them in the meantime to grow a family, plant vineyards, and seek the prosperity of the city they lived in.

Back to Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord . . ." Notice how Jeremiah doesn't promise us that God will tell us all His plans. He simply wrote that God knows the plans He has for us. He then goes on to

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describe those plans to prosper you and not to harm you. God's plans are for our good.

Sure, Jeremiah's words were written to a specific people at a specific time, but the timeless truth stands. God has plans and they're for our good. Let's pause for a definition here, because I'm not talking about the Americanized definition of good. I'm talking about the good described in Romans 8:28: "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." In the next verse, Paul tells us what he means by "good": "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (Romans 8:29). God's good plan for us is to form us more into the likeness of Jesus so that we can do what Jesus did.⁵ The "good" God has for you is to transform you into the image of His Son so that you can partner with Him in the restoration of all things. His plans for our lives are so much bigger and better than ours.

Which of your experiences have shaped you into the likeness of Christ? Successes and victories? I didn't think so. Your formation into Christlikeness happened through trials and difficulty, right?

That's how it was for the Israelites and everyone else in God's Word, and we should expect that's how it will be for us as well. God's plan for us will include trials. God didn't rescue Noah by stopping the flood; He kept him safe in the midst of the deluge. God didn't save Daniel from the lions' den; He saved him with the beasts at his side (Daniel 6:22). He didn't save Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fire; He saved them right in the midst of the flames (Daniel 3:25). *God's plans provoke trust.*

Does our Sovereign God cause or allow suffering? This question springs from an age-old debate in Christian circles. My take is that it seems like He does both. Sometimes, He seems like a Calvinist (causing); other times, He acts like an Arminian (allowing). Which goes to show us the inadequacy of our theological systems. God defies our categories. And when our theological brilliance fails us, we are left where we started: trust.

God *uses* suffering. He redeems suffering. Don't miss that sentence. God wants to take your pain and heartache, and He wants to transform you through them. He wants to use them for His glory and for your good. Let's remember the real definition of good: you becoming more like Jesus, not only for your own sake but also for the sake of the world. Your pains are part of His plans.

How might God use the trials you're facing to make you more like Christ? How might your present hardship lead you toward further intimacy and dependence upon God? These questions will never lend themselves quick answers, but they will bring you to deeper intimacy with God Himself. *That's the plan.*

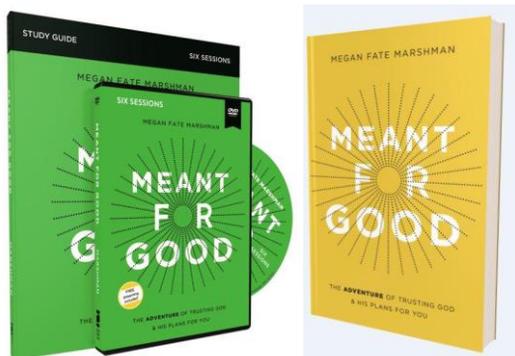
Step Up Your Game

During my (admittedly brief) vow of silence, I watched my students actively search for answers. My students had listened to my lectures for months and simply walked out of class each day with a few memorized facts for midterms. It wasn't until they took an active role that they made the subject their own. Even though I gave them no straight answers, they trusted me

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as their guide as they actively discovered the answers they needed. When I was grading their finals, I noticed that every student who showed up that day passed that portion of the content with a perfect score.

Jesus invites us into something truer and deeper than right answers and perfect futures. When we think He has taken a vow of silence, He's merely inviting us to step up our game as followers and pursue the class content ourselves . . . with Him as our guide.



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by Megan Fate Marshman

Meant for Good is a power-packed, biblical look at the truth that you really can trust God's plan for your life—no matter what your life looks like right now. Dynamic Bible teacher Megan Fate Marshman will help you discover how to stop discounting yourself from a hopeful future, start living in active dependence on God, and find your way to the perfect plan He has for you.

With authenticity and revelatory insights into the character of Jesus, Megan shares an engaging and fresh look at the core themes within the well-loved scripture of Jeremiah 29:11-14. Through winsome and inspiring stories, *Meant for Good* will show you how to trust God in your daily life, and more importantly, how to trust God's definition of good above your own.

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