

Chapter 1

The Desire for a Friend

She lived right across the street. She had blond hair and fair skin and blue eyes. I was the opposite, with dark hair, dark eyes, and a sun-tanned complexion. During the school year, she donned her uniform each morning and headed off to a private school. I walked to the corner bus stop for the public school. She was the oldest of six children; I was the oldest of five. We were best friends.

We did everything together, Ann and I. We crushed petals from her mother's rosebushes and put them in bottles of water to make "perfume." We played paper dolls on my front step and the "Brady Bunch" in her backyard - she'd be one parent and three children; I'd be the other parent and the other three children. We'd take turns being "Alice." We commiserated with each other about how terrible brothers were - she had two, I had four. We planned to always be friends. Forever.

But in the middle of sixth grade, my family moved. My parents wanted to move our family from the suburbs to the country where there would be more for the boys to do (and less trouble for them to get into). I was angry about the move. I didn't want to live in an old farmhouse in the middle of nowhere with animals. I didn't want to leave Ann. She was my best friend. But we moved anyway.

Ann and I tried to stay in touch for a while. We wrote to each other. She spent time during the summer with me. But it was never the same. Our friendship slowly faded away.

But my desire for a friend, a best friend, a "friend-no-matter-what" didn't end. Like Anne in *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery, I could say, "I've dreamed of meeting her all my life... a bosom friend - an intimate friend, you know - a really kindred spirit to whom I can confide my inmost soul."

It's a need we all share. A need for someone to talk to. Someone to share our joys and tears and hopes and dreams with. Someone who will dream our dreams with us - and even dream bigger dreams for us than we can believe. We long for someone to listen to our struggles and fears; someone who will understand. Someone who won't condemn us when we make a mistake but who will stick by us, love us, and encourage us to go on. Someone who will be there for us when we

THE GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP

need help - whether it's a listening ear, an already-prepared meal, a babysitter at the last minute, or just a hug.

Friends make us healthier. They give us an outlet to share our emotions, instead of keeping them all bottled up inside. Friends become a sounding board. Often, without saying a word, they help us to find the answers we're struggling for. They remind us to take care of ourselves. To slow down.

Friends give us a sense of belonging. This world can be a lonely place. We all feel lonely sometimes. Friends are the ones we can call on at our lonely moments and be reminded that someone cares, that we're not all alone.

Friends make us laugh. We can laugh together. Cry together. Hope together. Be silent together.

One woman said, "Friends offer a less emotionally complicated relationship than I have with my family members." Friends don't come with all the baggage of sibling rivalry and family problems. Friends are people we choose to be around because we enjoy their company. Because they make us grow and think.

Friends help us to feel special, cared about. They make the world a little brighter.

God knew our need for friends. He created that need. He created us with the need for companionship. He gave us spouses and families. He created the church to be a group of people who would encourage one another and build each other up. He reminded us of the importance of coming together. He knew that friendship could help us grow. The Bible tells us, "Two are better than one... for if they fall, one will lift up his companion" (Ecclesiastes 4:9,10, NKJV).

God gives us the gift of friendship. It is His gift of love to us, a tangible expression of His love and care for us. Friends are a glimpse of what the friendship He offers is like - friendship with Himself - although nothing can compare or even come close to what a relationship with Him really gives each of us.

The gift of friendship comes in all sizes and shapes. Not all friendships are the "best friend" type of friendships. Nor do all friends meet the same needs in our lives.

Some are acquaintance friends - people we know and see often. Most of our friendships may fall into this category. We smile and ask how each other is, rarely sharing more than "Fine." We exchange pictures of the kids and talk about work, but we never really share those things that are deepest on our hearts - our struggles and hopes,

THE GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP

our fears and dreams. Such conversations and sharing touch the surface of our lives but never get past it to the heart. To have a friendship that goes past the surface to the things that matter deeply to us, we must go beyond acquaintance and grow into a close friendship.

Close friends are those we share our hearts with. We get together often - in person, through the phone, mail, or e-mail. We share our struggles. Our close friends know our dreams and our fears. They know our children and our husbands. They know the things that really matter to us. These are the friendships that give us strength and encouragement on a regular basis.

Sometimes our friendship with another person is based on something we share - perhaps it's working together, being at a similar stage in parenting, or worshipping in the same way. We have friends who are our friends at work, at church, at the playground, or at soccer practice. We share something in common, and sometimes this is where our friendship begins - and ends.

Then there is the "buddy" friendship. These are friends we do things with, but we never really talk about the important things in our lives. Often men's friendships fall into this category. It's usually harder for men to share from their hearts. They tend to have friends to do things with - basketball, canoeing, golfing. Women can have these types of friendships as well - friends who are fun just to do things with. Whether it's shopping, walking together for exercise, or playing tennis, these types of friendships have their place in our lives too.

Another special type of friendship is that of a mentor relationship. In this kind of friendship, one person "mentors" or "trains" the other in some area or role in life. One friend could mentor another in her career or in her role as wife or mom. Someone might mentor a younger Christian in her walk with Jesus. Mentoring is an opportunity to share the wisdom you have gained from experience with someone else through a friendship. It's helping another to grow stronger as a person.

But the closest of all friendships is "best friends." Each of us will go through life with only a handful of "best friends," if that many. Best friends are rare and to be cherished. Best friends are those who have gone a step beyond a close friendship. These are the people we want to call when something exciting or devastating happens in our lives. They are the friends we share the deepest desires of our hearts with. We trust them enough to be ourselves with them - knowing that they will still love us and stick by us no matter what.

THE GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP

Friendships sometimes change. A once-close friend becomes someone we rarely see or talk to. Like my friend, Donna.

Donna was my best friend in high school. She lived down the road and around the corner. We talked about boys and school and parents. We went out for the school track team together. Donna was the maid of honor in my wedding. And I was the matron of honor in hers. After that, our lives started going different directions - literally. I moved one direction; Donna moved another. Today, months can go by without us talking. I don't know what's happening in her life - what she's struggling with, what her dreams are. And Donna doesn't know what's happening in my life either. Yet we used to talk about everything!

But although our friendship has changed, it's still there. All it takes is a phone call. When my father died, Donna was right there - helping with the boys, listening to me, watching me to make sure I was OK. She worried about whether I was remembering to eat. She spent time with the boys, giving them an opportunity to share their feelings - about their grandpop's death and about seeing their mom so sad. And when Donna was making an important decision in her life, she called me to tell me about it. She knew I'd care and that I'd pray. She knew that no matter how long the time or how far the distance, our friendship - though different - was, and still is, there.

The change in friendships can be sad. It's sad to lose the closeness we once had. But it's part of life. We grow and change every day. Our relationships will too. And sometimes the change can be happy, like when an "acquaintance friend" grows into a "close friend." Maybe even a "best friend."

Friendships are a blessing in our lives. They add the extra that we need to make life interesting and fun. They remind us that someone cares and loves us. And, hopefully, they remind us of Someone else who cares and loves us too. Life without friends would be like a garden without flowers. Can you imagine that? Just the necessary vegetable plants all in neat rows. All green. No vibrant red tulips. No sunny yellow daffodils. No softly fragrant lavender or roses. No pansies with their faces of purple and yellow and blue. I love color - genuine, bright, deep, alive colors. I can't imagine my yard without flowers. I'd give up vegetable plants before I'd give up my flowers. (Actually, I have given up vegetable plants because they didn't grow in my shady garden. So all of my garden is flowers!)

Not all friendships will be best friends. Or even close friends. And that's OK. We need the variety of different types of friendships. And

THE GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP

sometimes we need different friendships at different times in our lives. No one person - except Jesus - can be, or give us, all that we need. Not our spouses. Not our children. Not our best friend. Our lives are richer, and we are stronger when we're touched and taught and loved in a myriad of ways by lots of different people.

When Mary and I talk about raising our sons, I come away feeling like someone understands. We both have two sons, about the same ages. (Though I wish it were Mary's sons who were experiencing adolescence first! I could use the wisdom.)

Lilly and I can talk about our schedules and our frustrations, about wanting to make sure we're doing only the things God wants us to do, about not being sure what to eliminate from our busy lives - and we each understand the other's struggles, because we are each experiencing that too.

Candace is such an inspiration to me of what a woman's life can be when it is totally dedicated to God. I watch her and listen to her and know that I want to be the kind of Christian woman she is when I "grow up."

And there are so many others who touch my life in their own unique way - Tanya, Cecelia, Minda, Janet, Sue... The list just goes on and on. Some are closer friends than others. But all are friends. All are gifts from a God who knows just who I need in my life and at just the right time.

That's the kind of God He is. All-knowing. After all, He created us. He knows everything about us. Even things we don't know about ourselves - or at least don't want to admit to yet. He knows our heart's desires and the deepest longings and needs of our soul. He knows just what we need in a friend. And He will send exactly the friend we need, and the one who needs just what we can offer, as well.

It may be just a brief encounter. Like the day I sat discouraged and feeling alone at my desk. My husband, Tim, was recovering from an accident that left him in a lot of pain and somewhat dependent on me. Plus the boys were little and needed a lot of attention. I was giving and giving and giving - and not getting a lot of sleep. "O Lord, encourage me!" I prayed. That's when Tina knocked on my door. I knew Tina only slightly. We attended the same mothers' group. We'd never had a heart-to-heart conversation. We'd never even had lunch together. Even when she knocked on my door, few words were shared.

"I thought you might be able to use these," was all she said before she quickly turned and left, leaving me a little speechless and holding a

THE GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP

box. The box was full of household supplies (guess Tina knew it was hard for me to get out to the store). And in one corner of the box was one of my favorite treats. How did she know? She didn't. But God did. He prompted her heart. And in that split second, my heart was touched by love so warm and big it wrapped around me like a blanket, washing away all those feelings of discouragement and loneliness. I knew that I was cared about - by someone I barely knew and by Someone who knew me well.

At times He may send a close friend. Like when He sent Lilly. My three closest friends had all moved away. A fourth friendship lay shattered in much hurt and heartache. My heart longed for another friend, but my brain said No, that it was better just to keep people at a distance. It didn't hurt as much that way. So I reached out to encourage others but kept walls around my own heart. Then one of those I was encouraging began encouraging me. Day by day the walls came down. Little kindnesses, notes, time spent together, conversations. We thought so much alike. And we were at similar places in our parenting and spiritual walk. Before I knew it, I was right in the middle of a close friendship. And my heart was so joyful. (My brain was too.) God knew what I needed. And He knew who best to send. Someone I didn't even know. A new friend. A friendship that grows on.

God knows the desires of your heart too - whether you are yearning for a best friend or praising Him for the friends He's sent. He sees the pain and hurt in our friendships and longs to bring healing and peace. He delights in watching our friends help us grow - and in using us to help grow our friends.

Friendship is God's gift to us, a gift to treasure and enjoy. It is a source of strength and encouragement. And it is a tool He uses to help us grow in our friendship with Him.

If you are enjoying the gifts of friendship He has given you, thank Him. Pray for your friends. And praise Him for your friends. If you are longing for a special friend, ask Him. Let Him know your desire. Then watch for Him to unwrap the gift of a friend in your life.