

*Life*

interrupted

NAVIGATING THE  
UNEXPECTED

PRISCILLA SHIRER

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For Jude



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*Part 1*

**INTERRUPTIONS,  
INTERRUPTIONS**



## Chapter 1

# *And Now for Something Completely Different*

*For since the world began, no ear has heard, and no eye has  
seen a God like you, who works for those who wait for him!*

ISAIAH 64:4 NLT

I wish I'd known then what I know now—what the Lord is helping me begin to discover.

Maybe then, when those unexpected circumstances surprised me, I would've been better able to corral my untamed, unruly emotions.

Maybe then the twists of life wouldn't have caused such a twist in my heart, making me so severe and unforgiving.

Maybe then I would've recognized God's unseen hand in all of it and would've met the frustration or disappointment with a wink and a smirk, knowing He was behind it all, that this interruption was merely His way of laying a foundation for better things.

Maybe then I wouldn't have tried so hard to control it or hurry through it but would've yielded to it and embraced what the Lord allowed.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

But certainly not at the time.

You see, my life was going to be music. Literally. The first time I sang in church, I was five years old. I've got concrete memories of my little wobbly voice and knees that carried me through that day. From that moment on I was sure God wanted me to be a singer. I planned for it, aspired to it, and dreamed of what it would be like to stand on the stage and in the recording studio, singing my songs for Him. I even auditioned for several nationally known singing groups in my late teens and early twenties and was thrilled when they said they'd actually like me to come on board with them.

But people I went to for counsel encouraged me not to jump into music too soon and pass up some other experiences that might prove more valuable later. By the time I'd waited for all the obstacles to clear, those great music opportunities had passed me by. I'd missed my chance. The exciting, open doors that had been accessible to me before were now closed. I was devastated. What was I supposed to do now, when the one thing I'd wanted—the path I thought was God's plan for me—was no longer an available option?

I wish I'd known then what I know now.

Music was apparently out, much to the dismay of my hopes and dreams. So after batting around some alternatives, I decided to pursue a degree in radio and television. It seemed to suit me. If I couldn't do the music thing, I could at least enjoy a stage presence on camera. Television proved to be an intense, high-pressure undertaking—a lot of hard work—but very exciting,

especially when some jobs opened up for me at several different stations, performing in various on-air capacities. With each new assignment I truly believed this might be the platform that would elevate me to bigger and better things. But each time I started working for a particular show, their ratings began to suffer. Every single one was cancelled within a year of my joining the team. (Talk about giving a girl a complex!)

This couldn't be happening. I had studied for this. I had put in the hours. I was paying my dues and was absolutely certain the Lord had steered me toward doing this for a career, for a livelihood. Obviously, then, I had either heard Him wrong, or He had set me up to fail. What does a singer and broadcast professional do when nothing she feels called to is working out? I was barely in my twenties. And already feeling washed up.

I wish I'd known then what I know now.

Meanwhile, I was dating a young man, a wonderful guy who had captured my heart and seemed like the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. We had gotten pretty serious, even beginning to make those first, sunny promises of marriage. But in one of those twists and turns on the road to romantic bliss, our car had run off the road. We were done. And I was totally distressed. I begged God to restore my relationship with this man. We were meant to be together. I knew it! But despite all the talks and times spent together, all the plans and dreams we had begun imagining—fact was, he didn't want me anymore. And it came close to killing me. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I couldn't see anything good in store for me. I was losing at life and losing at love, all at the same time.

I wish I'd known then what I know now.

There *was* somebody else for me. Years later I was in love. (More on that later.) And after three years of marriage, with little effort, God allowed me to get pregnant. We were thrilled. Soon,

however, almost before the reality of “baby makes three” had even begun to hit us, I miscarried. Where we had hardly been able to keep our minds on anything else because of our excited anticipation, now we could hardly keep our minds on anything else because of our grief and disappointment.

Life. Interrupted again.

How could this happen? Why would God allow it? Did it mean we’d *never* be able to have children? Could we possibly get past this horrible experience and dare to try again, knowing how low the lows can be when your joy is snatched away?

Yes, we could.

Yes, we did.

First came Jackson. Then two years later, Jerry Jr. And when these fun little guys began rounding the corner from toddlerhood to the school-age years, Jerry and I decided we were closing up shop in the baby-making business. We both loved being parents but were so looking forward to life without diapers, sippy cups, and colicky crying spells in the middle of the night. I was fairly certain I didn’t have another pregnancy/baby/toddler experience in me.

Well . . . yes, I did.

When those faint pink lines shaded their way into a plus-sign on the pregnancy test I’d brought home from the store, Jerry’s and my plan for a new phase of life suddenly became our plan for an unexpected phase of life. This was not what we had in mind. We had felt so complete and satisfied with our two little boys and our nice little life, and—dare I say it—we were *shocked* to realize we were now headed in another direction: a six-pound, twelve-ounce change of plans by the name of Jude Maddox Shirer. And as sweet and good-natured fellow as he is, the October he was born represented a whole new chapter in our household—an unexpected one.

Then in the midst of trying to adjust my emotions and plans to suit this new development, our stable, settled ministry began to experience some growing pains of its own. While my pregnant waistline was expanding with no regard for the contents in my closet, our ministry seemed to be following suit. With a growing family to manage and a full load of ministry responsibilities to contend with already—even before having to think about adding a new baby to the mix—we were stunned to be thrust into another realm of opportunity and challenge. Our tiny staff (of which my husband and I made up two-thirds) was already stretched to the limit. We were grateful and excited, of course, about what we saw God doing. It's just that we were caught a bit off guard. We'd been content with the regular pace of family and ministry life as we'd known it for several years. We had learned how to find our rhythm and balance, but now things were changing. *Everything* was changing. Personally and professionally.

So a lot of things had happened along the way to alter my planned trajectory of life. A music ministry? Maybe not. Television career? Maybe not. That first expectation of marriage? First baby? Maybe not. Two parents, two kids—let's call it a completed family? Umm, maybe not. *Lord, how about at least an easily managed ministry?* Certainly not.

I wish I knew then what I'm starting to see now.

Call it the interrupted life.

## You Want Me to What?

I suspect that you, too, have experienced some interruptions along the way. It may have been something tragic—the death of someone close to you, a health scare, a debilitating accident. A love lost. An opportunity missed. A life goal unreached. It may have caused such a drastic change in your moods and makeup

and manner of living, you almost don't remember who you were before it happened. In many ways you've become defined by this thing that occurred, this one startling event that threw everything off balance.

But interruptions are not limited to huge, horrible things. In fact, they can be rather minor by comparison. Car trouble. Chicken pox. A funny, spoiled smell in the meat you'd set out to cook for dinner. Still, it's caught you by surprise. You weren't expecting it. You were traveling along with your list of to-dos in mind, fully knowing what the day held when something just crept up out of nowhere and caught you off guard. Suddenly your schedule is shot to pieces, along with all your preset notions on what it would take to get everything done. You've been blindsided, forced to deal with a new wrinkle, a new obstacle to navigate around.

Interruptions.

They come in all sizes. Large and small. Anywhere between majorly challenging and mildly inconvenient. An unforeseen hit to your family budget. A best friend moving out of town. A spouse confessing that he hasn't been totally honest with you about something. A doctor's report that is less than desirable. A pregnancy test that reads negative . . . again. A new supervisor at work who's nothing like the last one you'd grown to like so much. Another year of singleness when marriage is what you want. A sister who's going in for surgery and needs you to watch her kids for a few days.

It may even be something good. Like being asked to take on a new role in ministry, or finding out you have *three* babies in that belly of yours instead of just one. (Yes, that happened to a friend of mine.) Helping your daughter plan a summer wedding, or having to move to another state to accommodate a promotion. But even these good interruptions are going to take a lot of your

time. They're going to make things different than you've been accustomed to. They're going to cost you an expense you hadn't accounted for right now. So how do you respond? What's the best way to navigate the unexpected—a *Life Interrupted*?

Just to be clear: I *hate* interruptions! While I'm a spontaneous girl who enjoys impromptu adventures and activities on occasion, whenever I get a goal or plan fixed in my mind, I'm as persistent as the little squirrel I watched scouting for acorns in my backyard this morning. I don't want to be detoured until that nut is in my paws, in my mouth, then . . . mmm . . . in my tummy. Any detour away from that mission makes me antsy and unsettled. It's the way I've always been. Stick-to-itiveness, I think they call it. A good, healthy trait but—watch out—one that can quickly morph into one of my worst when I'm not willing to bend and flex to God's will, when I'm pretty sure what He wants is different from my aspiration.

That's what I found myself facing when little Jude was on the way and I was trying desperately to figure out how I'd be able to balance the demands of a growing family and ministry. I loved my life but felt stretched to the limit. So I knew my heart wasn't exactly into this. Didn't God know that Jerry and I had spent lots of time carefully crafting these plans for our lives? We'd given away all the baby paraphernalia in our certainty that our family was complete. The crib was gone. The baby swing was gone. The bouncy seat was gone, and lo and behold, I had some semblance of a waistline for the first time in years. Both of our kids had graduated out of toddlerhood, and I had mentally refocused myself onto a life with two young boys who (unlike when they were babies) could verbalize to me where it hurt, what was wrong, and how I could help.

So, again, I admit I was whining a little bit. Complaining. Those first few months of morning sickness were, uh—let's just

say, I was not the kind of Priscilla you'd want to be around. It was not my best moment, I assure you, especially as our ministry was growing and we knew we'd need to add to our staff if we wanted any chance of keeping up. We liked it small and intimate the way it was, but it couldn't stay that way any longer. Obviously, both of these things (the new baby and the growth in ministry) were gifts from God, but let's be honest—sometimes God's gifts are disguised beneath new responsibilities.

One day in the midst of my self-imposed pity party, I got the feeling God was asking me a question. Was I going to be a whiner, a complainer, a grumbler, a martyr, someone who wanted everybody to feel sorry for her the rest of her life even when there was really nothing to feel sorry for me about? Was this going to become my pattern for how I handled things that didn't go my way? Was this the kind of person my husband and family would need to get used to living with?

Or was I going to yield to what God was calling me to do—not just physically with this pregnancy and the additional needs in ministry but also in my attitude, my mind, my heart, my spirit? Was I going to surrender myself completely to Him? Was I going to embrace His plans for me?

Turns out God was about to send me *another* blessed interruption.

Not just Jude, my new little son, but Jonah.

In the pages of Jonah's well-known book of the Bible, God began to speak a new word to my heart. Even as I was wrestling with my interrupted life, God started showing me some things through the eyes of a runaway prophet, a man who *also* was interrupted from a life of relative comfort. A man who saw God's change of plans as something to be avoided and escaped at all costs. A man who would eventually need a raging sea storm and

three days in a fish's belly before he would come to terms with what surrender was all about and what it could accomplish.

I didn't want to be like Jonah. I didn't want to require God to reach into His bottom drawer of disciplinary tactics before I came around to His way of thinking. As much as I may not have planned to take on the responsibility of a newborn baby again—not right at that moment, at least—or felt we were prepared to take on the new responsibilities that ministry growth would undoubtedly require, I *really* didn't want the responsibility of becoming a person who thinks she knows more than God does. I've seen that in myself before. I saw it in Jonah again. And I did not want to be that kind of woman anymore.

Honestly, knowing my track record with God and how He's shown Himself strong in the face of all my life interruptions, I should've handled this phase of my life differently. I was a bit disappointed in myself. Because looking back, I had a lot to thank God for. You see, if I had joined one of those singing groups in my teenage years, putting my life on hold while chasing a dream God knew wasn't for me, I would've probably continued on that path long after I'd forgotten that my first job in life was not to sing for the Lord but to listen for His direction and guidance. I'm pretty sure now that His plan for me all along was to be involved in teaching ministry. And I'm just as sure that if I'd been out on the singing circuit, I would've made the journey back a much longer road than it was supposed to be. In fact, I might never have gotten here at all.

If only I'd known.

Those years I spent studying television and getting some great on-air experience seemed largely wasted to me at one time. But what I once considered a pointless detour turned out to be the ideal training ground for the video-driven Bible studies God knew I'd be involved in later on.

If only I could've seen it, could've trusted Him.

And what if that relationship—the one I'd wanted to become my marriage—had not been interrupted like it was? Looking back at it now, I can see God's hand involved in turning me away from one man and turning my heart toward another. It takes a certain kind of guy to handle the life that our marriage and ministry require. Had the first man decided to marry me—who knows, we might have been happy together, but I'm sure now that he wasn't the one I really needed. He wasn't tailored for me like Jerry is, ideal for what God knew would be required of a husband in a situation like ours. Apart from accepting Christ as my Savior, Jerry is the best decision I've ever made (or better yet, like my seven-year-old said to me the other night, "Daddy's the best decision God ever made for you.") But I'm telling you, it was hard at the time. I didn't want any piece of God's will that didn't include this other man in it. And yet the wounds he'd left behind made me appreciate all the more the healing salve of Jerry's perfectly suited kindness and love for me. I fell head over heels into the romance of a lifetime. How I thank the Lord now for unanswered prayers. Interruptions are often His way of doing something even better.

I wish I'd known that earlier.

Perhaps Jonah might've wished that, too. He was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel during the early part of the eighth century BC. And while we don't know much about his life prior to the events recorded in the book that bears his name, we do know from 2 Kings 14:25 that he had foretold some positive developments for his people, the Hebrews.

During the reign of King Jeroboam II, the nation witnessed a restoration of territories that had been taken by Syria. This allowed Israel to achieve its most prosperous era since Solomon, primarily by allowing them to control most of the important trade routes that ran through Palestine, connecting the far reaches of

the ancient world. And Jonah was the prophet who had seen this coming. He had heard from the Lord, declared the details, and been proven right when these welcome events came to fruition. Most likely, therefore, he was popular, highly respected, and greatly appreciated in his role. Handsomely paid, as well, for the stature he enjoyed.

He was living a prophet's dream. And he was more than content for things to keep on going the way they'd always gone, the way he had planned and fully expected they would. He was living for God, doing His work, and doing it well. Why would God ever send him to do something else?

If only he'd known.

And yet Jonah, great prophet that he was, couldn't see any more clearly than we usually can when we try to understand why God would be causing or allowing this interruption to happen to us right now, when the only thing it's doing is making us feel frustrated and put out. It's the last thing we want or seem to need. And yet God has let it happen anyway.

So I could relate to Jonah as I sat there pregnant with our unexpected third son and with new required tasks in our ministry, reading again a story so familiar yet one that God was opening to my eyes in a fresh, new way as I pondered what to do with my resistant heart and its stubborn streak. I knew how it felt, as Jonah did, to experience a clear word from God and want to run in the opposite direction. I knew what it was like to watch circumstances maneuvering around me in such a way that God's hand was obviously on them, drawing me to come along, asking me to trust Him enough to cooperate with His purposes.

But I also knew the desire to rebel. I knew what goes through a person's mind who is not wanting to engage fully in the season of life God is calling her into.

Running from God. Fighting against God's clear will. Jonah certainly did it. In fact, he was the only prophet in the whole Bible who *ever* did it. It's always been easy to judge him or look down on him—one of the bad boys of the Old Testament. Well, it's not that simple for me. Looking down is hard to do when you're so near the bottom yourself, when emotionally you've got one foot out the door and one hand on the steering wheel. Was I going to let my interruptions do to me what Jonah let his do to him?

## What'll It Be Next?

That's the dilemma that brought me here. To this book. To you, wherever you happen to be. Very personal stuff. Very real life. Just like yours. I know we can relate to what each other is dealing with. I know we share a common language when it comes to understanding what interruptions look like, feel like, sound like, scare us like, bug us like. We've all had our lives altered and redirected along the way. We've all seen our Plan A's take a back-seat to other realities—realities we just don't want to accept or live through. Yet here they are. This is our life. We can run, but we can't hide.

Knowing what we know about God, we do our best to accept the fact that we wouldn't be having to put up with this stuff right now if He didn't want us to, if He wasn't allowing it to happen for some reason. But that doesn't always make it a whole lot easier to handle, does it? I may feel upbeat enough to follow along on *some* days, but on others I'm ready to head for the hills or perhaps just sit down and give up.

We've all been Jonah before, haven't we? We've gotten irritated. We've wanted to duck out. We've wished God would go pick on someone else for a change. So something important is

still missing inside. Something is keeping us from living out what we say we believe about Him—that we can trust Him even when we don’t understand, that He won’t lead us astray, that His will is more important than ours.

Why do we still run from Him and His plans?

Well, I was hoping maybe we could learn together, the same way I learned when God sat me down with Jonah, when I looked up from the middle of my *Life Interrupted* and saw some things I wished I’d known a long time ago. I’m not all the way there yet, you understand. But I know I don’t want to let one more interruption send me off frantically dodging God’s will and missing out on what He’s wanting to accomplish in me and through me. I want my life to radiate what happens when God has a person’s heart at His full control, when every event or circumstance is simply another avenue to know Him better and show forth His glory.

That’s what the book of Jonah is really all about. It’s not just about the big fish—not just Jonah and “the whale.” The main character in Jonah’s story is God. Every single chapter—in fact, every single verse—speaks of the grandeur of God, the grace of God, the sovereignty of God, the beckoning of God, the discipline of God. Everywhere you look in this tiny piece of ancient historical literature, God is there. He’s *always* there. He is right in the middle of every interruption.

So if you’re feeling the pinch of the interrupted life, guess what? God is right here in the middle of yours too, even if it’s something you’ve sort of brought on yourself (as many of mine have been). This interruption—whatever it is, no matter how big or small—represents your next best chance to see Him take center stage, to show you what He can do when the unexpected only makes you more expectant than ever.

Like you I’ve run from change. I’ve run from life’s surprises. Sometimes I’ve run just to keep moving when I didn’t know what

else to do. But I've run into a problem. Because in running toward what I thought was better, safer, more pleasurable, more fulfilling, less painful, less complicated, or less confining, I've actually been running from God, from His will, and from His blessing.

And I'm tired of running. Aren't you?

What if we *knew* this interrupted life was less about the problem and more about the process? What if we *knew* this roadblock or aggravation hadn't caught God by surprise even if it's come as a shock to us? What if we *knew* that the direction He was taking us provided opportunities we'd always dreamed about, even if they didn't look exactly the way we thought they would? What if we *knew*, by not getting what we want, God was ultimately giving us something better?

I think we can know—and *live* like we know.

And Jonah's place is a good place to go to find out how.

# LIFE INTERRUPTIONS

## DIVINE INTERVENTIONS

Interruptions. They're aggravating. Sometimes infuriating. They make us want to tell people what we think of them. But how we handle interruptions actually tells us more about ourselves.

The prophet Jonah's existence was interrupted by a call of God that would require a complete change of life. And it scared him enough to make him run in the opposite direction. Yet, what seemed to him to be an unnecessary and useless interruption was really an opportunity for Jonah to be involved in something the likes of which the Old Testament world had never seen before. This interruption was really a divine intervention and it held more adventure and possibility than he could have ever imagined.

We, like Jonah, tend to run from interruptions. When major pains and minor problems cause a hiccup in our carefully calculated plans and goals we head in the opposite direction. Who knows what we might be missing by running from what could very well be God's means of steering us towards the most magnificent outcome of our lives. Jonah could tell us a story or two. So could you. And so does popular conference speaker and author Priscilla Shirer in this very personal account of opportunities lost and lessons learned—and the amazing freedom and fulfillment that comes from going with God even when He's going against your grain.

**PRISCILLA SHIRER** is a Bible teacher who enjoys bringing the stories of Scripture to life. She is also the author of popular books including *One in a Million*, *A Jewel in His Crown*, and *Discerning the Voice of God*. Priscilla is married to her best friend Jerry with whom she founded Going Beyond Ministries. And while Priscilla loves ministry, she prioritizes her role as wife and mother. Between writing and studying, she spends the majority of her time cleaning up after their three fabulous sons.

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