

FOCUS[™]
ON THE FAMILY

After the Boxes Are Unpacked



Moving On After Moving In

➤ SUSAN MILLER ➤

FOREWORD BY JOHN TRENT, PHD

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the Boxes
Are Unpacked



FOCUS®
ON THE
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❧ SUSAN MILLER ❧



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

After the Boxes Are Unpacked: Moving On After Moving In
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A Focus on the Family book published by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

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Some stories presented in this book are composites based on the author's experience and interaction with hundreds of women who have been uprooted by a move. Any resemblance to actual persons is coincidental.

Some people's names and certain details of their stories have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. However, the facts of what happened and the underlying principles have been conveyed as accurately as possible.

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Editor: Liz Duckworth

Cover design by Beth Sparkman

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data for this title can be found at www.loc.gov.

ISBN 978-1-58997-849-2

Printed in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Praise for *After the Boxes Are Unpacked*

There's a reason why moving to a new area is ranked on stress tests at the same level as the death of a spouse. It's an emotional hot zone—even if you're moving to a place and opportunity you're excited about. It often takes years for a new address to provide the kind of sanctuary our hearts long for. In the meantime, the pressure on everyone in the family picture can feel enormous. Fortunately, someone has stepped forward with a plan that takes the sting out of moving and accelerates the time it takes to turn a new location into an emotional and relational haven. You're going to feel much more at home after you've read Susan Miller's book *After the Boxes Are Unpacked*.

DR. TIM KIMMEL

Author, *Grace Based Parenting* and *Grace Filled Marriage*

We moved eighteen times in twenty-three years, and to say it was a challenge is a gross understatement. After I discovered Susan Miller's book *After the Boxes Are Unpacked*, it made the rest of those moves smoother. In this new edition of her book, Susan not only shares new strategies available to those who move, but she also addresses the psychological aspect of making those moves. This is the most comprehensive and definitive book about moving and making that move more effectively.

Susan helps the reader journey from the sadness and loss of a move into a mind-set of enthusiasm and hope. If you want to be the most content you can be when it comes to your next move, then read this book.

ELLIE KAY

America's Family Financial Expert[®] and bestselling author of *Heroes at Home*

Sometimes moving can leave you feeling as empty as the corrugated boxes you've tossed away, but Susan Miller's book *After the Boxes Are Unpacked* gives you hope! From finding a new doctor to making new friends, Susan Miller shares encouraging, heartwarming stories of women who've "been there and felt that" when moving. She provides practical action steps that help you move forward in your new surroundings. This is a must-read for every woman who finds herself relocating to a new community.

SHARON JAYNES

Author, *The Power of a Woman's Words*

As our song proclaims, "The Army goes rolling along," and so do the spouse, the kids, the pets, and all the emotions with the news of another PCS. As a chaplain, I have had the privilege of using Susan's book *After the Boxes Are Unpacked* for families across the globe. Susan has been our conference speaker in Korea, Hawaii, and Germany. Everyone should experience a move and read *After the Boxes Are Unpacked*, and see what God will do in his or her life. Don't PCS without it!

US ARMY CHAPLAIN LT. COL. KENT WALKER AND
SHAWNA WALKER

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Foreword

FOR MANY COUPLES, their major goal in moving is to stay married! For singles, the need is to maintain their sanity—and to find that “special friend” with a truck! Moving isn’t easy. As someone who has packed too many haul-it-yourself trucks in his time, I know that moving can rank right up there with wallpapering, root canals, pet-sitting a pit bull, and having your six-month-old triplets all start to teethe at the same time. *But* it isn’t just the physical exhaustion that’s the real challenge in moving. It’s *emotionally unpacking* that can hurt long after the sore muscles have healed.

The *real help* you need after the boxes show up at your new place is what this book is so incredible at providing. Here, in this revised and updated edition of what’s become a family classic, you’ll learn how to close loops and start anew. How to help your children do more than just mope around, how *you* can find and be a new friend, and how *you* can move forward as a person, spouse, and family. Reading Susan’s book is like having a world-class coach show up at your door the day you found out you were really moving. She brings her wisdom and encouragement to take the pain out of having to pack, the smarting out of having to uproot the kids, and the sting out of leaving family and friends. And once you get to your new destination, like a personalized welcome service, Susan Miller will provide biblical advice and clearheaded counsel to guide you through the many adjustments still to come, months after everything is on the shelf.

Believe me, Susan’s been there. She and Bill, her husband, moved more than a dozen times. She knows the financial, emotional, and

spiritual challenges that come with a change of address. She knows what it's like to leave parents and best friends, search for a new church, hunt down a seemingly nonexistent reasonable rental home, and find a doctor in a strange city at midnight. More than that, she knows how to grow spiritually during those times of incredible transition, as well as where to find the courage to put down roots all over again. Even if you just had to move a few months ago! Or the place you're going isn't like *anywhere* you've ever been! In your hand is hope and help.

Not only has Susan lived out the principles you'll learn in this powerful, hands-on resource, but she has also taught them to hundreds of people just like you. Susan's ministry has been a wonderful success. Her program has been used by churches across the country, and I think it should be a required ministry in every church that's serious about welcoming newcomers.

Over the years, I've had the privilege of helping a number of authors develop their books. The authors I've worked with all have three traits. First, I only work with people I know personally and believe in wholeheartedly. Second, they have to be people who have long-term track records of serving and loving the Lord and who can clearly articulate that love to others. And third, they have to be able to put practical, biblical help within easy reach of those experiencing a heartfelt need.

Susan Miller fits all those criteria. It's an honor for me to recommend her to you as a wonderfully talented author with words of hope for those soon to face, or already dealing with, all the trauma and uncertainty that goes with transition. This book, like all of Susan's books, will build your faith and strengthen your family *and* help you get the boxes unpacked!

God's best to you,

JOHN TRENT, PhD

*Gary D. Chapman Chair of Marriage and Family Ministry and Therapy
at Moody Theological Seminary*

Introduction

HAVE YOU RECENTLY moved or prepared to move, or do you still feel unsettled since you moved? I promise you are not alone. There are millions of women like you, experiencing the life-changing effects of being uprooted by a move.

According to a US Census Bureau report, the number of women in the United States who moved in one year was 18.3 million! There were nearly 36 million men, women, and children in the United States who moved during that time frame.¹

For many women, being uprooted and going through a tangible loss can be overwhelming. If you are single, divorced, or widowed, the experience is even more difficult without a support system.

Some of the biggest challenges you face when you move involve leaving behind family, friends, a home, and familiar surroundings that were a part of your life. You might feel disconnected, disillusioned, or discouraged. Perhaps you even feel a great sense of spiritual confusion and doubt. Women go through a range of emotions as they experience the stages of loss and grief.

I refer to moving as a “closet illness” because so many women have said to me, “I didn’t know anyone else felt like this.” “I thought something was wrong with me because I dreaded the thought of moving.” “I resented being relocated and uprooted.” “I thought I was the only one going through this kind of stress.” Research has shown that moving

is one of the top five reasons for stress. No wonder you feel the way you do!

In the pages that follow, there is hope and encouragement to get you through the major impact of a move. I've worked with hundreds of women just like you and equipped them with the tools for a smoother transition. In each chapter I'll be giving you biblical principles and practical application to guide you through your move, and I'll walk with you through the process. I'll share what I've learned through my own experiences in moving, along with the wisdom I've gained from over twenty years of teaching and counseling women who have faced the same circumstances. Throughout the book, I'll draw from a reservoir of my "moving friends" who have so graciously shared their stories, tips, and ideas to help women like you through the transition of moving.

You'll get through this; I'll show you how.

Cheering You On—Some Things You Need to Know

I am delighted that Focus on the Family has given me the opportunity to update *After the Boxes Are Unpacked* after twenty years in print and over 100,000 copies sold!

The upheaval of moving, the application of biblical principles, and the three-step process to let go, start over, and move forward are timeless and will not change in this updated edition.

It is my desire to capture a whole new generation of movers facing daily change in a mobile society. There are issues and challenges a mover faces today that she didn't have twenty years ago. I want to seize this opportunity to wrap the unchanging Word of God around the lives of movers in a changing world and to ensure a stable home foundation in the midst of being uprooted.

For the last twenty years, I have been in full-time ministry to women and families uprooted and displaced by relocation. This has given me far greater experience, knowledge, and insight into the emotional and spiritual needs of movers today. Traveling all over the world to bring women the encouragement and hope of Jesus Christ keeps me on the cutting edge of their struggles, stories, issues, and daily challenges.

New, in this edition, is a greater development of the unique challenges faced by corporate expats, the “trailing spouse,” the wives of professional athletes, missionaries, and the single, widowed, divorced, and retired mover. I’ll introduce the “crisis move” and the way it affects the family, as well as share stories of inspiration from military spouses who are all too familiar with frequent moves. I will offer ways to reach out to women and families who have moved into your community—even to those who may not share your beliefs, cultural lifestyle, or value system.

In the back of the book, you’ll find Focus on the Family’s “Twelve Traits of a Healthy Family.” These traits are reflected throughout this book as they relate to the impact of a move on a family.

On a personal note . . . when I wrote this book more than twenty years ago, my husband, Bill, was as much a part of each page as I was. His daily encouragement was a stepping stone from one chapter to another, and our stories gave insight into our marriage and our unconditional love for each other in the midst of our moves.

When Bill lost a painful four-month battle with cancer, my life became uprooted in ways I’d never experienced before. The loss took me to a deeper understanding of what it takes to survive a major life crisis and life change. The biblical principles I’d discovered to survive my many moves and shared in this book held true as I lived with this painful loss. Though this book is about moving, it is relevant to all the changes in life and the loss we experience. How I began to let go, start over, and move forward after Bill’s death is reflected throughout the chapters and can be applied to any major life change you might be going through.

In updating this book I could not leave out our stories and my many references to Bill. Little did Bill know that he would still be a part of each page, but this time I will feel him looking over my shoulder as I encourage you all the more with how to survive change and loss in life.

PART 1

Let Go

My home address? Christ.

In Him I dwell, wherever else I be.

As bird in the air, as branch in the vine,

as tree in the soil, as fish in the sea.

He is my home.

My business address?

Here.

Little piney cove or London, Corinth,

Calcutta or Rome, Shanghai or Paris.

My business address?

Wherever He puts me,

but He is my home.¹

RUTH BELL GRAHAM

CHAPTER I

FROM GRITS TO GUACAMOLE

For though I am far away from you my heart is with you.

COLOSSIANS 2:5, TLB

THEN . . . It was four o'clock in the morning and just beginning to sprinkle rain as we walked down the driveway to our van. Bill and I, and our two children, were facing another journey into the unknown. In order to leave our house empty and clean for the new owners, dear friends let us spend the night with them. We fought back tears as we realized our lives would never again be so daily connected. As we exchanged hugs and said our good-byes at the end of the driveway, the pain of loss and separation became real. The rain began pouring down as we rushed into the van, not lingering to form the words that stuck in our throats. Silently we asked ourselves the question, *When will we see each other again?*

Once in the van, I rolled down the window to my friend Nancy. Our faces almost touching, our eyes brimming with tears, I whispered, "I just don't know if I can do this one more time!"

Nancy answered encouragingly, "Yes, you can, and you will—with

God's help. Now go!" I quickly rolled up the window, and as we pulled away, I held back tears of sorrow. I reassured Bill and the children that I was going to be okay. I knew in my heart that somehow I had to find it in myself, once again, to let go of all that was near and dear, and to start over, moving ahead with a new life.

As we began our long journey westward, I reflected on all of our previous moves. Some had been good—a chance for a new beginning, a fresh start. Some had been a part of Bill's climb up the ladder of success. Some had been easy and others hard—especially as our children got older.

Moving is more than loading and unloading boxes. It is leaving behind everything familiar to face the unfamiliar.

When we moved, countless questions filled my thoughts: How am I going to find new doctors? Where are the best grocery stores? When is garbage pickup day? Who will I call if I need a plumber or an electrician? Which radio station will have the best country music? How will I begin to find trusted babysitters?

Finding answers to a list of simple questions was always a concern and worry to me. The big questions were overwhelming to even think about: Did we make the right decision about where to live? Where do we find a new church home? Will we have good neighbors? Will the schools be good? What about making new friends? *Oh, the effort and energy it will take!*

I looked in my rear view mirror and began to focus on everything I left behind. How could I start over when I hadn't even begun to let go of everyone and everything I loved? I felt the loneliness of being so far away from family and friends creep in. I felt the guilt of leaving behind Mama, who had been very ill. I felt anger and resentment as I asked, *Why do we have to move again? Why do we have to move so far away from all that I am and all that I identify with?* I fought back the familiar depression and the dread of the unknown that clouded my mind.

My thoughts switched back to the present. The bags really were packed and the van really was loaded down with valuables that couldn't

be shipped ahead. The rest of life was in brown boxes in a moving van headed for a destination two thousand miles away. Once again I was pulling up stakes. Once again I was saying good-bye to friends. At this moment, I didn't belong anywhere—not in Atlanta, our old city, and certainly not in Phoenix, our new home, which seemed a million miles away. The emptiness overwhelmed me.

This was our thirteenth move in eighteen years of marriage. Bill was climbing the corporate ladder in hotel and restaurant management, and moving came with the profession. It also became a recurring part of our life together.

I smiled for the children's sake, to give them a sense of security that everything was going to be all right. I engaged in some meaningful conversation with Bill, to assure him I was indeed standing by his side in this corporate transfer and was united with him in this move.

Hours drifted by. I woke up from a nap that had been induced by the emotions of good-byes and leaving Atlanta. The sun was beginning to shine and the rain had stopped. The air was fresh and the day felt new in the early morning dawn. With the breaking of day came hope for tomorrow and renewed optimism to overcome new challenges. A smile came, not only to my face, but to my heart, and I felt a sense of God's peace. The Lord had been my Rock for thirteen moves, and together we could do this again.

He was the Friend who would go with me. He would ease my hurt and bring me contentment. God would never leave me. I knew He was already at my destination, waiting with open arms.

Little did I know at the time that this move would have a profound impact on my life and become the catalyst for this book.

A reassuring Scripture verse came to mind: "Don't be afraid, for the Lord will go before you and will be with you; he will not fail nor forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:8, TLB). I leaned over, kissed Bill on the cheek, and broke the silence by saying, "This is a beautiful day to begin a new journey together." I took a deep breath, and in the quietness of my heart, said to myself, *Yes, Lord, I am going to make it one more time!*

Westward Ho!

On our journey to Phoenix, we looked like the notorious Griswold family from the National Lampoon film series with our loaded van, two children, one dog, six pieces of luggage strapped on the top, and a U-Haul trailer in tow carrying all my plants. (We always try to hold on to everything and take it all with us, don't we?) Of course, I didn't realize that after three days in the U-Haul with the summer heat and no air, all my plants would be dead when we arrived.

We arrived in August, the hottest month of the year. I cried the entire month. I couldn't get used to seeing all those rocks in yards, some of which were even painted green to look like grass! *And where was everybody?* How was I to know they had all left Phoenix to get out of the 120-degree heat?

Bill and I had come to Phoenix previously, in July, for a weekend house-hunting trip. Those three-day decision-making trips never allow enough time to know the area where you want to live. There's never enough time to find the best schools and a house you can afford that will hold all your furniture. Needless to say, we didn't find anything on that trip; so when Bill went on ahead of us to start work, he bought a house I had never seen before arriving in Phoenix. We lived in a hotel for two weeks, waiting for the house to close. Of course, you know what that's like—the glamour wears off quickly!

All the things I had to do raced through my mind. I knew I needed to get everything squared away by myself because Bill would be preoccupied with his new job.

The first thing I did was to make our children's transition as smooth as possible. I knew it was crucial that they get settled in quickly, so I registered them not only in school, but on soccer teams, since they both had played in Atlanta. They started practice before we even moved into our house.

Bill *was* preoccupied with his new job and started traveling immediately. I spent the days trying to learn which streets would take me where I wanted to go and how to get back to the place from where I started. I used the time while we were still in the hotel to make all

the necessary arrangements and appointments to get the house up and running.

With Bill and the children settled into a routine, it was time to tackle the house itself. The empty rooms chilled me, despite the 120-degree heat. The big moving van containing the bulk of our furnishings arrived, and the movers dumped furniture and boxes carelessly in each room. I was left to take each pile of stuff and, once again, make this house a home for us. Slowly, as I unpacked each box, hung the pictures, added a few new plants, and placed accessories and cherished mementos in each room, I began to feel comforted by all that was familiar.

By the time the house was settled, school had started. Bill was entrenched in his work, and I set out to find my niche in Scottsdale, the area near Phoenix where we had settled.

I soon learned Scottsdale was referred to as “La La Land,” the home of the rich and the famous. I certainly didn’t feel like a “La La Lady”! It seemed everyone played tennis and golf, or jogged in cute little outfits with cute little figures to match. I was already emotionally fragile from the move, overly sensitive to the spider veins in my legs, painfully conscious of my “thunder thighs,” and totally aware of the extra pounds I was always trying to lose. My self-image was pretty low. I didn’t seem to measure up.

I remembered how moving always created a loss of identity and affected my self-esteem.

Once again I thought, *If I don’t get involved, it won’t matter, and it will just be easier when we leave the next time.*

All our previous moves had been within the Southern states. Born in South Carolina, I had never been so far away from my deep Southern roots. What I knew of the West was only that I’d be eating guacamole instead of grits. I struggled with living in a world where my Southern heritage and Southern accent didn’t fit. I was terribly homesick and missed the close relationships of family and friends.

Part of me anticipated the opportunities a new place would offer, and part of me was sad to leave behind our family, our church,

established friendships, and our Southern roots. Still another part of me was just plain weary. I wanted to be like the tiny doodlebug that hides by burying itself in the sand. The thought of moving to a new place and starting all over again was both challenging and depressing.

Sometimes it's hard to see God in the midst of our circumstances. When we ventured west, I went through a whole lot of "Why, God?" and "Where are You in all of this?" And yet, I knew He had always been with us, whether or not we saw Him in the midst of our chaos, or even if we didn't have all the answers to "why."

I knew that coming to Scottsdale was part of God's plan for our family. Yet I also knew there were plenty of changes that needed to take place in me before I could even begin to call this place home. In my twenties, I had rededicated my life to Christ. In my thirties, we were baptized together as a family, and in my forties it was as if God said, *Go west and grow!* "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11, TLB).

When our family moves, finding a church is one of the first things we do to begin to put down roots. We visited many churches before we settled at Scottsdale Bible Church. There our life as a couple and as a family was enriched and we began to grow in our relationships with Jesus Christ. It was there Christ became the *center* of our lives, not just a sidebar to our lives.

As my security in Christ deepened, my self-image began to change. I only wanted to measure up to God's principles, not the principles of those around me. Gradually, my feelings of inadequacy were replaced with an adequacy found in Christ and through His Word.

By moving me to the desert, God was quenching a thirst in my heart that only He could fill.

Do not call to mind the former things,
Or ponder things of the past.
Behold, I will do something new,
Now it will spring forth;

Will you not be aware of it?
I will even make a roadway in the wilderness,
Rivers in the desert.

ISAIAH 43:18-19

And indeed He did.

Now . . . so much remains the same, and so much has changed since moving to Arizona.

I still live in Scottsdale but have moved twice since we bought our first home.

I still go to Scottsdale Bible Church, where I have taught the Moving On After Moving In class for twenty-five years to hundreds of women new to the area.

I still don't play tennis or golf, but I am great at kickboxing and Zumba.

My spider veins and thunder thighs have gotten a little worse with age, but on a hot day you'll find me in shorts. As far as losing a few pounds, well, they come and they go.

My circle of friends extends all over the world with Just Moved Ministry, but I still cherish my circle of dear friends from Atlanta.

My Southern roots will always be a part of who I am, but my Western roots are a part of who I have become.

I still love to plant flowers and have a yard full of geraniums.

I also love to plant seeds of encouragement and hope in Jesus Christ as I speak all over the world.

I still love grits, but guacamole is definitely a favorite.

I still miss oak trees, but there's nothing like a cactus in full bloom.

I might have rocks in my front yard, but I have compromised with green grass in my backyard.

I still stumble through speaking Spanish but know enough words to be gracious to another culture.

Our two children are grown and married. Bill Jr. and his family live in Atlanta, and Ginger and her family live in Gilbert, about thirty minutes from me.

I have six amazing grandchildren who fill my life with joy and memories.

I founded Just Moved Ministry in 1995, and it's become a global outreach to uprooted women, touching the lives of thousands of women and families for Christ.

After forty-five years of marriage, I still love Bill, even though he's gone home to be with the Lord.

And I still love Jesus. More now than I did then!

Steps to Survive a Move

Maybe you are where I have been: grieving over leaving family and friends, concerned about a broken relationship or the stress on your marriage, worried about your children's adjustment, confused about knowing which doctor to call, wondering where to find the right church, or simply overwhelmed by all the tasks to be done. It can be mind-boggling.

Over thirteen moves I learned biblical principles and practical actions that not only helped me let go and start over, but also moved me closer to Christ. I'll be sharing these valuable insights with you in this book, along with the three-step process I used not only to survive, but to thrive through transition. If it helped me, it can help you as well. Those three steps are:

1. Let go
2. Start over
3. Move forward

Let go. The first step in my journey of surviving a move was to *choose to let go*. I had to make the choice to cherish, rather than cling, to anything or anyone that would prevent me from starting over and moving forward with my life.

I needed to be prepared to let go of anything but never to let go of His hand.

I had to let God *mend* any feelings or emotions that kept me from being the whole, happy, and contented woman He wanted me to be.

I had to choose to be open to God's love. So many times when we had moved, my spirit had been closed because of the anger, depression, grief, stress, expectations, comparisons, or discontentment (just to name a few) that I felt. Until I learned to understand my feelings and to go through the process of letting go, I couldn't be open to receive God's love and healing. I couldn't really begin the process of starting over. This time, I knew there was plenty of healing that needed to take place in my heart, and I was ready to let God take control.

Start over. I also had to *choose to start over*. I had to let God *mold* me through this process. As part of starting over, I needed to work through the feelings of loneliness, loss of identity, and inadequacy that threatened to overcome me at times. On the home front, I had to create a new nest all over again, recognize the effects that moving had on our children, and remember the importance of staying connected in my marriage. Of course, I had to be ready for the challenges and opportunities that new beginnings bring to each of us.

Until I allowed God to refine me and teach me through the process of starting over, I couldn't be ready to move forward with my life.

Move forward. Finally, I had to *choose to move forward*. Notice I always use the word *choose*. It is my choice to be open or closed to change and to what God is teaching me through it. I realized it was time to take the focus off myself, embrace where I now lived, and invest in new relationships. It was time to come full circle by being content in my circumstances and choosing to move to a place of peace, joy, hope, and trust, with God as my focus.

I couldn't mature in Christ until I let Him mend and mold me.

I couldn't move forward with my life until I was willing to let go and start over. As I persevered in my walk with Christ, I felt the fulfillment and contentment that only He could bring into my life.

As I began to:

let go

start over

move forward

God began to:
mend
mold
mature

The journey of surviving a move requires action and choice, according to God's plan. I let go—God mends me. I start over—God molds me. I move forward—God matures me.

Take My Hand

Enough about me. I want to talk to you—the uprooted woman, the wounded traveler. This book is written for you, my friend. I have walked in your shoes, felt your joy in the good moves and your pain in the bad ones. God has put you on my heart. He has taken me down the road of thirteen moves to be able to turn around, reach out to you, and take your hand in mine.

Perhaps you've just moved. Maybe you're getting ready to move. Maybe you're dreading it, or maybe you're looking forward to it. My prayer is that this book will help you move closer to God as you begin the journey of letting go, starting over, and moving forward with your life.

I will take you through the process step-by-step. We'll laugh and cry together, but most of all, we'll grow together. Remember, you are not alone! Take my hand, and I'll tell you the rest of the story as we walk the journey together.

“Now glory be to God, who by his mighty power at work within us is able to do far more than we would ever dare to ask or even dream of” (Ephesians 3:20, TLB).