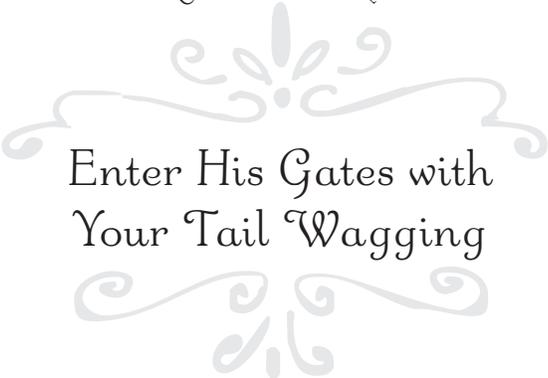


CHAPTER ONE



Enter His Gates with
Your Tail Wagging

SADIE IS THE QUEEN of the backyard. That is to say, while my sister and I are away at work, Sadie reigns over all she sees in the backyard. I'm usually the last one to leave in the morning. Before I go, I put Sadie's collar on her. Then, with Sadie almost jumping for joy, I lead her to the door with a huge bowl of popcorn in my hand. She hastens outside onto the patio and promptly sits and looks up expectantly at me.

Then comes the moment she's waited for. I throw a handful of popcorn over her head, then another

to her right, and a third to her left. But she never even sees the second and third launches. She already has her head down, gobbling up the popcorn as fast as she can eat it. I tell her goodbye, then I'm off to work and Sadie starts her day outside. She never looks up.

But, boy, is it a different story at the end of the day! When the back door opens and Sadie sees I'm home, her attention is all on me. If you have a dog (and I'm guessing you probably do because you're reading this), you know what I'm talking about. What joy! What exuberance! What energy! What a greeting!

I'm not sure what your dog does, but when Sadie runs in the door when I get home—and I mean runs—her tail is up and wagging, her body unable to do anything but sprint at maximum speed. Around the couch! Stop! Bark! A quick check to see if I'm following. (I usually am.) Turn! Run the other direction! Bark! And the game usually ends with both of us panting and sitting together on a couch, happy to be together. It's pure canine joy, and I love it.

After one of these very happy welcomes from Sadie at the end of the day, I remember thinking if a Golden Retriever had written Psalm 100:4, it would have

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said something along the lines of “Enter His gates with your tails wagging!” She is the living, breathing, four-legged example of what it looks like to make an entrance expressing complete joy.

For more than a year, the idea of entering God’s presence with my tail wagging didn’t do more than make me smile, as I thought about how that kind of full-blown joy might gladden God’s heart. And as a matter of fact, if that’s all that can be gained from this comparison, that’s still quite a lot. Oh, that I could give God the kind of pleasure that Sadie gives me when she goes completely off the charts with joy each time I come home!

But if I’m honest with myself, most of the time I don’t enter God’s presence with a Sadie-like natural exuberance. Most of the time, I enter with my head and my heart far away. Preoccupied. So although it doesn’t come to me naturally as it does for Sadie, I think there’s a lot to learn from her about the right way to approach God.

One thing that’s obvious is that Sadie anticipates my presence. She knows what time I ordinarily arrive home from work each day, and you can bet she’s close by the back door, listening and waiting. The minute she

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hears me inside or the light goes on, she's scratching on the door letting me know she's ready to come in!

Scripture is filled with passages telling of the writer's longing for God's presence.

As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So my soul pants for You, O God. (Psalm 42:1)

O God, you are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you,
my body longs for you,
in a dry and weary land
where there is no water. (Psalm 63:1, NIV)

At night my soul longs for You,
Indeed, my spirit within me seeks You diligently.
(Isaiah 26:9)

Clearly, the saints of old experienced times when they felt deep yearning for fellowship with God. In many of those contexts, the longing for God was during a time of either spiritual dryness or of trial. What they had in common was their understanding that only in the presence of the One for whom they longed would

they experience consolation and complete satisfaction within their souls. External factors might have created the longing, but they knew that only God could satisfy it.

I think that's one reason Sadie waits at the door for me. Her experience has taught her that when the door opens, her longing for fellowship (and let's face it, popcorn) will be satisfied. But only in the presence of the one who opens the door. The application here is pretty straightforward. I will anticipate God's presence more and move joyfully into His presence when I remember His goodness. When I recall that nothing satisfies the deepest longings of my heart like fellowship with Him. When I reflect that every truly good thing I have in life is from His loving hand.

But there's more to Sadie's joyful entrance than the careful watching and waiting. It's the no-holds-barred way she comes through the door without any sort of hesitation. She throws her entire self into it: barking, playing, running, tail-wagging, wagging, and wagging some more!

The opposite of what Sadie does is a very sad picture indeed. You've probably seen a dog—usually a stray—that has obviously been abused. Maybe he won't

come near a human at all, or if he does, it's only with great hesitation and shyness. The abused pooch will slink up with its head tucked, and if you reach out to pet him, he might shrink back or even run away. That dog has learned not to trust.

But can we not trust God? Think, first of all, what it cost Him to make it possible for us to enter His presence. In John's Gospel, Jesus proclaims, "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved" (John 10:9). Jesus is the very door into the presence of God. And God opened that Door on Calvary when Jesus opened His flesh and shed His blood. In so doing, He took on Himself all the wrath we deserve for our sin, so we could have fellowship forever with God. Words can never express the cost of this sacrifice. Indeed, the price of admission into the presence of God is a cost so steep that we could have never paid it. God alone could purchase our way, and only at the expense of His own dear Son.

Secondly, think of God's invitation into His presence. The writer of Hebrews declares that we should "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). God Himself tells us

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to come near Him through Christ with confidence. He has no more joy in seeing a slinking, cringing believer than I have in a dog that can't believe he's welcome. In fact, if my heart is touched by the sight of a cowering dog, imagine how the Good Master's heart yearns for a believer who, overwhelmed with guilt and shame, can't believe he is welcome.

Please don't take my word for this. Instead, listen to the encouragement from the Lord Jesus Himself in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In the story, a much beloved son demands his inheritance, leaves home, throws away everything he has through wild living, and then falls into immense poverty. Finally, he comes to his senses and determines to return home. Though expecting nothing, he hopes to be brought on as a hired hand. Humbled as he is, he has no hope of welcome. And what happens? "But while he was still a long way off," Jesus says, "his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). Do you notice what the father did when he saw his long-gone son? He didn't wave to him and smile. He didn't walk to meet him. He didn't wait for his son to get to the front door. He ran to welcome his son home. To claim him as his

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own. To restore to him all the love and privilege he had ever known as a son.

Believer, never, ever doubt that you are welcome in the Good Master's presence. No matter what you've done; no matter what you haven't done, God has opened the door for you through Christ. If sin is keeping you away, it doesn't have to.

And why not enter His presence boldly? Scripture clearly states what awaits us there: mercy, grace, help. My tail is wagging already!

Maybe I'll never enter God's presence with the same kind of natural, joyful anticipation and confidence that Sadie shows when she comes through the back door each evening. But if I concentrate on just how good the Good Master is and what it cost Him for me to know Him, I'll definitely enter His presence with a more Sadie-esque spring in my step. A smile in my heart. A love and appreciation for my Master. I'll enter His gates with praise.