

Q&A with Bianca Juarez Olthoff, author of *Play with Fire: Discovering Fierce Faith, Unquenchable Passion, and a Life-Giving God*

Q: Bianca, you grew up in a ministry-minded family. What did you learn about God's character through your childhood?

A: As a product of a low-income area, words of affirmation and hope from most adults were as uncommon as ungrafted walls. The concept of having a plan and purpose for my life felt as foreign as having a pool in my backyard or a European vacation. But I held onto the words of Mr. Charles, my Sunday School teacher, and the faith of my mother. I started to believe that the promises in the Bible weren't just for pretty, polished, and perfect people. They were for me too.

Every night my father would pray blessings over his growing family as he tucked us into bed. As he kissed our foreheads and turned off the bedroom light, he would tell us we were beautiful and loved. My twin sister had external headgear that protruded from her mouth; I had thick, tortoiseshell glasses; and we both weighed more than he did (don't judge, our freckles were heavy!). Though I felt neither beautiful nor loveable, I believed my father in the same way I believed Mr. Charles. I knew God loved me and had a plan for me. As I believed my biological father, I knew I had to trust my heavenly father.

Longing to be chosen, and confident by God's love, I woke to belief and began learning to appropriate the promises of God as my own. God was for me; He'd chosen me, and I knew it. Through the taunts, jeers, and shaming words of church kids and neighborhood kids alike, I developed a new sense of faith. My life and circumstances didn't change. My entire family shared a small house with no air-conditioning next door to a schizophrenic neighbor who grew and sold marijuana out of his backyard. We shopped at thrift stores and bargain bins. Our house was broken into, and crack addicts looking for a cheap hit robbed us. But even still, I knew I was chosen. I knew I was promised a life that looked different than what I saw.

In a spiral bound notebook on wide-ruled line paper, I wrote down Bible verses as if they were written directly for me. "Yup," Jesus told me, "You did not choose Me but *I chose you*, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you" (John 15:16).

Maybe it was desperation. Maybe it was childlike foolishness. Maybe it was real faith, but no matter the reason, my eleven-year-old self started to believe that God was *for me and chose me*. God wanted me to be on His kickball team at recess and by His side and hold onto His promises. I believed it.

Q: What happened to your faith during college?

A: When I started college, I decided to treat it as a time for reinvention. For me, this meant shedding both weight and shame. Leaving home was my chance, I thought, and I worked tirelessly to sever all connection to my childhood life. I ritually reminded myself that no one on campus knew I was an illiterate child who shared a bedroom with my twin sister and snuck food into closets while no one was looking. No one I met knew I was poor or made fun of me because of where I lived or the color of my skin. No one in my dorm knew I'd witnessed demeaning prejudice against my father and his lingering accent. I buried the shadow of the little girl who hid under blankets in the recesses of my mind. I ignored the memory of my first reinvention, my God-given metamorphosis at the tender age of eleven, and went on to pursue my own selfish attempt at transformation: I decided I would be perfect.

Determined to convey the appearance of utter flawlessness, academic excellence was the bar. From color-coding and re-writing my notes to study groups and note cards, I was obsessed with academia. I would have done almost anything to earn an A. And my maniacal behavior didn't stop there. I became obsessed with dieting and achieving an elusive number on

the scale. I fixated on controlling every aspect of my life and believed it was up to me to insure I would never be made fun of again. I had the power to guarantee I'd be chosen first for metaphorical kickball games, and I could diet (read: starve) myself into clothing that was hip and trendy instead of having to shop in the plus-sized section of department stores. Never again would I need to wear an extra-large forest green jumpsuit with elastic waistband and faux gold buttons (aka my Easter outfit circa 1989).

I can't even begin to recall how many diets I've been on, but seriously, it's an embarrassing number. I tried to control every situation. I lost 45 pounds, I earned a stellar GPA and I dressed only in the trendiest clothes. My work was excellent, my professors loved me, and my scholarships kept coming in. I, I, I. My, my, my. Me, me, me. I had become the captain of my ship, the driver of the vehicle I called destiny, the god of my own life.

Q: Your mom was diagnosed with brain cancer just before you turned 21, and your perfect world fell apart. How did you respond?

A: I was confused by how a good God would allow bad things to happen to good people. But more than confused, I was angry. Our family sacrificed everything for the gospel and building the church worldwide.

Since childhood, my parents taught all their children to give generously in time, money, and love. Though we didn't have much, we always gave what we could. Before my father was a pastor, he was a servant. He would wake up before the sun on his one day off to gather people from the church we attended and led them down into Baja Mexico to build orphanages, homes, and provide impoverished communities with basic needs. He'd later lead international trips deeper into Mexico, into Latin American and Japan. How could God allow this illness to strike my father's wife?

Though Dad had a global passion for those who didn't know Jesus, Mom loved helping people locally. Whether it was leading the church choir, organizing the homeschool ministry, or volunteering in neighborhood graffiti removal campaigns, she had a heart for her community. She would open our home to neighborhood kids and host a "Good News Club" where she would teach a Bible story on a felt board and then lead all the kids in a craft or activity. My mother gave her life to others; her heart was for the broken. So why did God repay her by giving her cancer?

Any idea of perfection and poise vanished, and I didn't care if I looked insane or desperate. I was insane and desperate. I cried out to God because I didn't have the answers, I couldn't control the situation, and I lost my ability to fix, fight, and finagle my way to perfection.

Q: You write that your life was on fire for several years. What went up in flames?

A: In the firefighting community, there is a phrase that is used to express a critical moment in the beginning stage of a fire. This moment occurs when the temperature gets to a certain level where everything combustible in a room spontaneously bursts into flames, spreading the fire immediately and instantaneously. The "flash point" is the point at which everything that can burn will burn.

In those days, the temperature of every area of my life had reached a level of combustion simultaneously that started to feel like a scene from the movie *Backdraft* or *Ladder 49*. Fire was everywhere. Relational. Physical. Familial. Financial. Spiritual. There was heat on all fronts and as I reached my flash point, everything I ever wanted burned down around me. And as I watched a life blazing, I was left with two choices—walk away from the flames or walk into them.

Q: How did you respond to the blaze?

A: Looking back, I suppose I was in the middle of a quarter-life crisis and wasn't even aware of how ridiculous I was acting. I spent money on clothes and shoes as a coping mechanism to deal with my issues of value and worth. I bought a convertible BMW because I wanted something, anything, to make me feel like I could go faster and farther in life. And I had braids with hair extensions because, well, I obviously had no clue what I was doing with my hair.

I had unintentionally set up my own gods and demigods to deal with the silence and supposed inaction of God. Unlike the children of Israel, I wasn't in blatant sin or idolatry. I didn't chisel away and craft a calf out of gold. I hadn't run around in a drunken debauchery like the chosen children of God. Nope, I was doing everything right. I was reading my Bible! I was praying! I was going to church! I wasn't like *those* people! I frequently used exclamation marks!

But I believed my issues to be less than those who had gone before me. I compared my small idols to their big idols. But idols are idols. I compared my small sin to their big sin. But sin is sin. I was blind to the fact that I had made much of myself and was obsessed about where God was taking me *to* rather than where God had brought me *from*. I didn't want to see myself as a member of the idolatrous Israelites, but the truth is, I was no different.

Just as God sent Elijah to urge the Israelites to surrender and turn away from their gods, He still sends people to remind His children to surrender and let go of gods who can't rescue, respond, or react. As the children of Israel had a spiritual history and witnessed God do mighty things, I did too. But in my desire for control and wanton wishes, I forgot – about the mighty God who could do what no one else could do.

Q: And you were transformed by the fire?

A: In college I read “The Rising of the Phoenix” as part of a project on Greek mythology. The legend permeates more than Greek tradition and has been told and retold over years and cultures. And to early Church fathers like Clement and Lactantius, this bird was a symbol of resurrection, rebirth, and renewal. As I recall the story, however, the Phoenix was more than a faraway fable or symbol of faith ... it was me. My life was up in flames and I had nowhere to turn.

In the loneliest of times, we have a wondrous opportunity to discover a deity who is not far away, but close; not silent, but speaking; not incapable, but incredible. It is *that* God who took me through the fire to reveal His presence.

We have the ability to be transformed in the midst of chaos, exhaustion, and confusion. From the deepest fiber of my being, I believe when we go through life's fires we will rise transformed. No, our transformations won't happen through mythical fire from a silent sun like the Phoenix, but we will go through the fire like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and experience the presence of the one true God who created fire. Unlike the gods of mythical times, our brazen and bold requests for transformation will be heard by God who will resurrect us to new life through the power of his Son, Jesus Christ.

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Play with Fire:
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