

Biblical Wisdom for a  
Healthier Relationship with Your  
Mother-In-Law or Daughter-In-Law

MAKING  
ROOM  
*for her*

BARBARA & STACY REAOCH

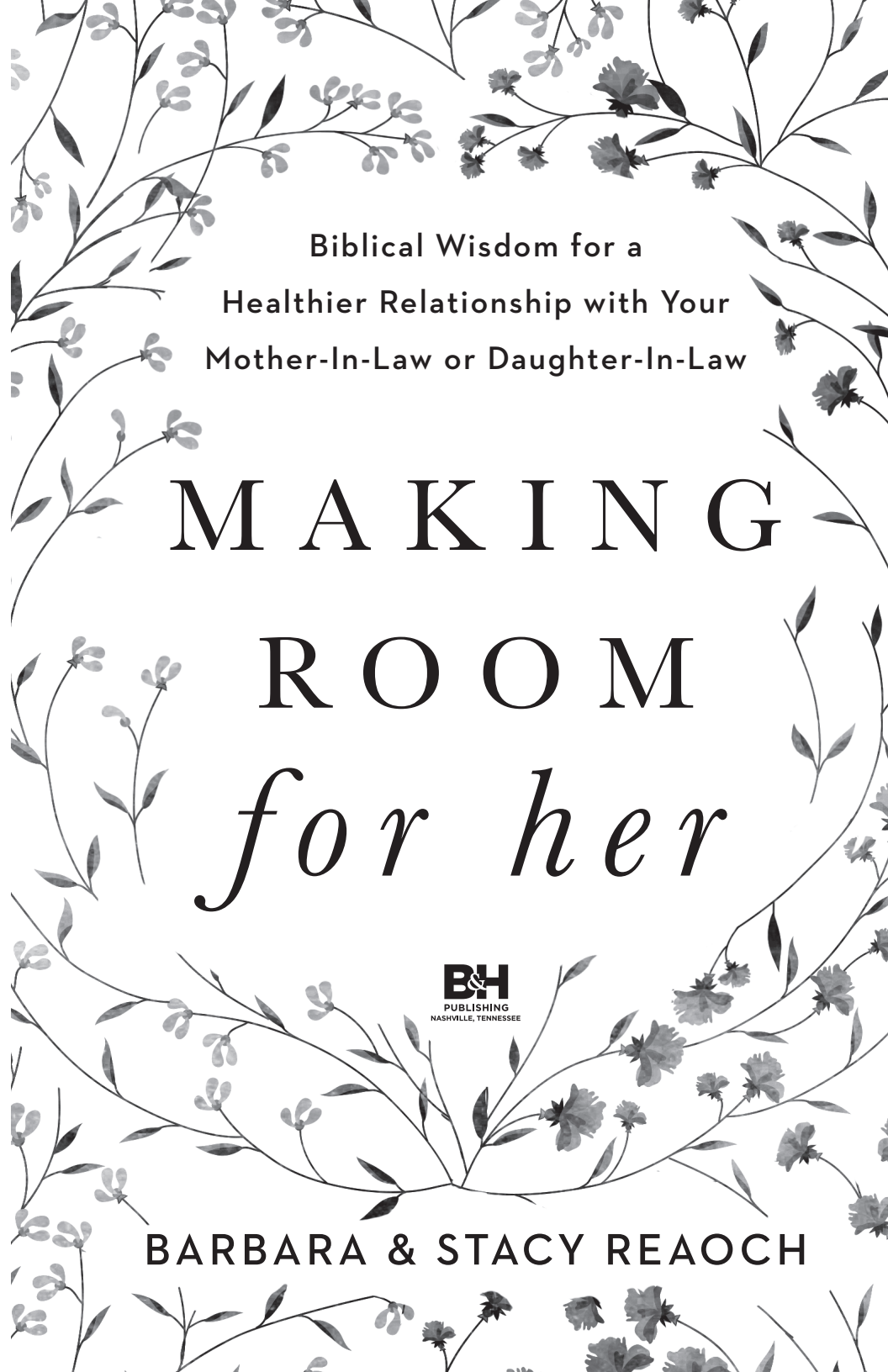


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To the women of Three Rivers Grace Church and  
our friends who prayed and shared their stories. Your  
transparency helped us understand the struggles and  
hope in the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship.  
Through you we saw that making room for “her” is  
possible by God’s grace.

—Barbara and Stacy







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## INTRODUCTION

**A**re you ready to cultivate a healthier in-law relationship? Or maybe you're ready to give up, wondering if your hard relationship is hopeless. The truth is, even in the best of times, family relationships can challenge us. God puts us in families to give us a place where we can be nurtured and secure. But families also disappoint us and tempt us to bitterness. Whether you are opening this book with an expectant heart or as a last resort, we pray you'll find hope and help.

Our names are Barbara and Stacy Reaoch, and we are not experts on the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship. We are merely two women whose hearts God has graciously joined together through the life of one man—Stacy's husband and Barb's son! We're here to tell our story and give you hope. With twenty years of ups and downs, we've known some hard times. But God has been at work. No matter how we may have messed up, God has always shown up to help us—to grow our love and appreciation for one another. Even though we are women from different backgrounds, with different personalities and diverse priorities, we've found common ground; more than that, genuine love. Perhaps you wonder if God could do the same for you. By letting you in on our struggles and triumphs and hard-won lessons learned, we're here to say this: *he can*.

We haven't written a book of coping strategies. Nor are these pages filled solely with personal advice (though we chime



in with practical ideas from time to time). We don't ignore difficult issues and tell you to simply hope for the best. Instead, we ask hard questions: Why are in-law relationships so challenging? Why do in-law dynamics break down? Why is it so easy to offend or be offended and so hard to forgive? As we explore these things together, our ultimate aim is to point you to the only One who gives lasting transforming truth—Jesus! As he has helped us in his Word and through his Spirit, Jesus will meet your deepest need in your in-law relationship.

Every relationship—even the in-law-relationship—is a canvas on which the Master Artist paints the glorious truth of the gospel. With every phone call or family gathering, God paints another stroke. He is always working. He is faithful to his promise to use all things for our good. Out of the ordinary, even with *her*, he is creating beauty.


We don't know what your relationship is like with “her,” your in-law. Perhaps it's in a decent place. Or perhaps you've been hurt. Maybe you fear the risk of another heart-breaking failure, even in picking up this book. Find comfort in this: as we developed each chapter, we talked with many women. And we heard the hurt and hesitation in their hearts. Some had to come to grips with the hard truth that not every relationship ends happily on this earth. Others learned that even when they did not understand God's purposes, that they could trust him. Still others have seen God work wonders in their in-law relationship as they've intentionally put his Word into practice. While all of their stories are different, and the status of their relationships with “her” are in varying places on the spectrum of enjoyment, one thing is true for them all: God moved inside them. And isn't that the real miracle? That God changes your relationship with *her* by changing *you*?



## INTRODUCTION

One of us took the lead in writing each chapter, but as a whole, the book weaves together our mutual input. The book is written from the perspective of two believers, given that both of us know the Lord, but as we go, we also include words to the woman whose in-law is not a believer.

As we wrote, we waded through several hard conversations. Open discussion drew us closer together in surprising new ways, deepening our love for each other. Given how much that discussion helped us in writing the book, we pray that you will read it in conversation with other women so that you, too, might benefit from the power of communal processing. To aid you in this, each chapter ends with questions that are designed to start a conversation between you and God, you and your in-law, and if you are in a small group, with other women.

Jesus is all about hope. He sees those who are hurting. His heart of compassion always acts to help. He comforts us through his Spirit and his Word. We pray you see Jesus on every page. As you read, ask God to open your eyes, to see his heart, and to make you more like his Son as you navigate your in-law relationship. He gives hope that never disappoints. 

This hope will not disappoint us, because  
God's love has been poured out in our hearts  
through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.  
(Rom. 5:5)









# FIRST IMPRESSIONS

*How Our Past Shapes the Present*

Would any of you being willing to talk with me about your relationship with your mother-in-law?" Stacy asked a group of women she had dinner with. Immediately there were groans mixed with nervous laughs. "How much time do you have?" said one of them. "Can this be anonymous?"

It's no surprise that talking about this relationship can be a touchy subject. From the intrusive mother-in-law on the TV show *Everybody Loves Raymond* to jokes cracked among a group of moms enjoying a night out together, there's a common thread of the dreaded mother-in-law.

How often are our impressions shaped by the stereotypes around us? On *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Marie Barone and her husband, Frank, live next door to their adult son, Raymond, and his wife, Debra. Marie constantly shows up at the house, unannounced, critiquing Debra's housekeeping and cooking skills. "Maybe the children would like to try something homemade for a change?" she says as Debra stirs the box macaroni and cheese.

Debra manages to put on a good face for Marie, but then explodes behind closed doors to her husband, frustrated with her mother-in-law's constant intrusions. The tension between



the women even makes Debra want to hide the fact that her family is at home in order to avoid more interactions with her mother-in-law (which we'll shorten to MIL as we go). The in-law relationship provides sitcoms with lots of material. Many situations are extreme, but the producers and directors know that women identify with just how strained this relationship can be.

Barbara asked a similar question to other women, "How would you describe your relationship with your daughter-in-law?" Diane spoke of the disappointment in realizing that she and her daughter-in-law (which we'll shorten to DIL as we go) "are not quite family and will never really be friends." Stephanie recounted how her DIL leaves strict instructions of how to care for her three-year-old. "It makes me feel like my DIL doesn't trust my judgment. She must think I didn't do a very good job raising her husband." With every visit, Marilyn says, "I've learned to bite my tongue around my DIL. I know she's insecure in her new role, but she often finds fault with what I say. My son hears about it the minute I leave."

In real life, we're not as likely to laugh at our strained relationships. The frustration can lead us to pull away or isolate ourselves, avoiding the in-law that makes us feel like we're not good enough. The cultural stereotypes of in-laws being difficult can make us prone to expect the worst. We might go into our marriage with low expectations of the in-law relationship because of what we saw happen in our parents' lives, or what we see on TV. Our first impression might be a negative one that sets us up for a disappointing relationship from the get-go.



Kate knew that her boyfriend's relationship with his mom was strained. The first time she went to meet her, Brandon



refused to take her to the home he grew up in. Instead he wanted to find a neutral place, a baseball game, that wouldn't be flooded with the painful memories he had of growing up. Kate had a positive outlook on the relationship. Sure, Brandon had a difficult childhood and a strained relationship with his parents. But Kate thought this would be an opportunity to win her future MIL over. *I can help smooth things over*, she thought to herself.

Little did she know just how difficult that would prove to be.

The first meeting with her MIL was less than ideal. While she expected that Brandon's mom would ask her questions to get to know her, she seemed completely uninterested in engaging in conversation. Instead, she wildly cheered for the baseball team, fixing her full attention on the game. Kate repeatedly tried to ask her questions throughout the game, but felt surprised and hurt that it wasn't reciprocated. That initial rocky start gave a bleak outlook for the future. Suddenly the dream of having a close-knit relationship with her MIL was clouded by the fear of future negative interactions.

Sue felt certain that she and her future DIL would enjoy a better-than-typical relationship. In her desire to be a loving MIL, Sue read all she could about her new role. She decided to "think before speaking" to avoid words that might lead to a misunderstanding. Knowing her rigid tendencies, Sue asked God for help! Flexibility—an openness to new ideas and experiences—would make her more approachable.

Everyone wanted a dream-come-true wedding for the young couple. A lengthy invitation list, and high-end reception venue created a financial strain. At the couple's request, Sue and her husband decided to share the wedding expenses. But how should they respond when the bride's less-than-wise decisions meant greater costs? Sue and her husband decided



to overlook their disappointment. Yet more unwise decisions made it harder to ignore their future DIL's self-interest. Was Sue overly sensitive? She wondered. But then her husband asked why the bride-to-be ignored or rejected many of Sue's loving attempts of support. Negative interactions dampened Sue's hope for that better-than-typical relationship she once hoped for.

### The Root of Our Problem

No matter what kind of difficult relationship you might have—whether it be mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, parent to child, or employer and employee—we all have the same basic issue. Romans 3:23 says “for all have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We are selfish creatures who instinctively put our own needs and desires first. We create our ideal schedule and fit people in around our activities. We think about what works best for me and how I can look good in the situation. What is the easiest and most comfortable situation for myself?

Without the grace of God, we rely on our own faulty self-will to do the right thing. But our hope is found in the gospel. If you have turned away from sin and cried out to the Lord and his work on the cross for forgiveness, you can be sure that his Holy Spirit indwells you. And the Holy Spirit allows us to draw on the grace and power of God to change us from the inside out.

Second Corinthians 5:17 tells us that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” We've been given the mind of Christ and can pray that as we grow in our faith, the fruit of the Spirit will abound in our lives—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). There



is no relationship that is without hope. The mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship is complex. But when the power of God is involved, we can trust that change and growth are possible.

We know that every MIL/DIL relationship is different. But it might be helpful for you, as you read our words in this book, to understand our first impressions of one another.

### Stacy's First Impression

I first met my mother-in-law when I was barely seventeen years old. Ben Reaoch and I were introduced by mutual friends at the county fair. We struck up a friendship (or rather, I got to know him in hopes of a Homecoming date) and we soon began spending time together. I remember the first time I walked into his beautiful home. Barbara was sitting on the couch, Bible in her lap, with a huge smile to greet me. She was warm and friendly and instantly made me feel welcome. But there was something different about Ben's family.

Ben's house was filled with Christian books, Bibles, commentaries and even a list of things to pray for on the kitchen table. *That seems strange*, I thought to myself. My view of prayer was something that happened in church or before a holiday meal. Even though I considered myself a Christian, I didn't attend church regularly. My Bible sat on my bookshelf as a trophy from confirmation class. But it became obvious that the Bible was a well-loved book in Ben's house. Little did I realize that Barbara's warm smile and hospitable spirit was a fruit of God working in her life.

As Ben and I got to know each other, I enjoyed spending time at his house. I was well aware that Ben's family was much more religious than my own. But it didn't stop me from wanting

to be with him. I always felt welcome. And I had no idea that this high school romance would blossom into marriage. In my mind, I would have a wonderful Homecoming date but then be free to date whomever I wanted, especially as we headed to college. But the more time we spent together, the more my heart grew attached to Ben. By the time we graduated from high school and were planning to attend college in separate states, I could not imagine being without him. So we committed to stay together through a long-distance relationship.

My freshman year of college was life-changing for me. God had used Ben's family to plant seeds of the gospel in my heart. By the time I was at college, I knew there was something lacking in my supposed Christian life. I sought out a church and landed at a "come-as-you-are" church plant across the street from my dorm. It was the first time I clearly heard the gospel, and something clicked. There was much I didn't understand, but I knew enough to realize that I was a sinner in need of a Savior. God surrounded me with believers at my 40,000-student secular university. The girls in the dorm room next door began sharing Scripture with me. A young woman from a campus ministry knocked on my door, inviting me out to coffee. She gave me the first Bible I actually read. She discipled me all four years of college.

At the same time, God was working mightily in Ben's life. He originally went to school to become a chemical engineer. But during his freshman year, Ben felt God calling him into full-time ministry. We had numerous heated discussions over the long-distance phone lines, debating what the Bible taught about the roles of men and women. His call to ministry didn't sit well with me. "I don't want to raise our kids in a hut in Africa!" I passionately exclaimed. That was about the extent of missionary life I knew (or thought I knew).



We were at two very different places in our spiritual walks. So just before returning for our sophomore year of college, Ben broke up with me. It was devastating. Why would he break up with me when I was finally a real Christian? I was sad about not only losing Ben, but losing the connection to his family. Barbara and Ron were excited about my newfound faith in Christ. They were eager to hear about my experiences with campus ministry and what I was learning in the Bible.

Ben and I were separated for two years with very little communication. But the irony is that I stayed in contact with Barbara and Ron (I can't recommend this being the right course for every person in the situation I was in, but it is the way my story unfolded, nonetheless). I came home from college on a break and emailed Barbara to see if I could stop by for a visit. I ensured that Ben wasn't there because it was too hard to see him. But I loved how excited his parents were to hear about my relationship with Christ. When I decided to go on an overseas study to Spain, Ron pulled out the world map to see exactly where I'd be. They had become not just the parents of my (ex) boyfriend, but my friends, my brother and sister in Christ.

So, when God led Ben and I back together our senior year of college, I was overjoyed. The Lord had answered my long-awaited prayer. Marrying into a godly, Christian family was a dream come true! Everything should work out smoothly and without conflict because we're all Christians, right?

Despite our committed love to one another the past twenty-plus years, we have faced our share of challenges. From beginning our marriage an ocean away, to figuring out how best to communicate, to the myriad of complexities when children arrived, we've gone through various ups and downs. My idealistic vision at the start of our marriage was replaced with

the realities of two sinners who both have their own plans and ideas. And two women who love the same man.

### *Our First Bump in the Road*

Ben and I had broken up for two years. By the time God reunited us, we quickly knew that we wanted to be married. It was agonizing to live hundreds of miles away from each other. We wanted a short engagement so that we could begin our new life together. But there were a few roadblocks in the way. Even though we had both just graduated from college, I still had a year of student teaching remaining. I had received a scholarship to begin working on my master's while student teaching in Michigan. Ben was to begin a pastoral internship in Minnesota. We couldn't fathom being separated one more year, so I began to search out options to student teach in Minnesota. Unfortunately, my college decided they could not set a precedent by allowing me to go out of state. If we wanted to be married soon, I would need to leave my program.

We shared our news with Ben's parents. In a sweet voice Barbara responded, "Don't you think if God provided for Ben to do this internship in Minnesota and provided Stacy with a scholarship in Michigan, that maybe you should wait one more year to be married?" I felt my blood pressure rise as our dream to be married in five months was dashed. Would Ben follow his mom's advice? Would we be forced to go through another agonizing year of a long-distance relationship?

My heart sank as I waited to see how Ben would respond. We considered our various options, but both Ben and I felt strongly that the time to be married was sooner rather than later. Ben told his parents that we were willing to make sacrifices in order to be married that year. We would find another way for me to student teach in Minnesota.



Barbara and Ron were gracious to support our plans. But it was the first realization for my naïve young mind that just because we're all Christians doesn't mean that we'll see everything eye to eye.

### Barbara's First Impression

Decades later, I still remember Stacy's bright eyes and sweet smile the first time we talked. Such a beautiful, poised young woman. As she sat across from me in our family room, I wondered, "How could a seventeen-year-old be so comfortable talking with me, a woman more than twice her age?" Stacy was refreshingly different. She asked well-phrased, insightful questions. I expected her to be interested in knowing my son. Was she truly interested in knowing me as well? Clueless, it never occurred to me that she and Ben would one day marry.

Ben is our firstborn. From the moment I knew I was pregnant with him, the course of my life changed. I wanted to be the best mom ever! I read every parenting book I could find. Even better, a mother of five responded to my need for support. This experienced mom became my mentor and friend. My friend's voice of experience helped me grow in confidence to care for my newborn son. This little boy was my life's joy and purpose.

I loved my child more than life itself, but I struggled with doubts. Would there be enough selfless love in my heart for the long haul? Was I even capable of sacrificial love? When I expressed this fear to my friend, she heard my greater need to know God as my Father. She shared the good news that Jesus could heal my broken heart of sin's disease. God is love! He would fill me with his all-powerful life and love and give me all I needed to love my child.

By God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, I believed. A new mother, I now was a new child of God. My life's real purpose became clear. My heart filled with faith, hope and love. In God's kindness, within a short time, my husband Ron also trusted Christ. Together, Ron and I began to grow in understanding what it means to follow Jesus.

God had used our firstborn child to lead us to faith in his only Son, Jesus Christ. Then we began to wonder—*What does a Christian family look like?* Though talking to God felt like learning a foreign language, we began to pray for our son. We prayed, not only for his first steps, but for his future. What work would God call him to? Whom would he marry? We asked God, not for a particular job or type of woman, but for our son to do God's will. We prayed his wife would know and love God. Our goal was to equip our son and let him go—not keep him dependent on our care. We wanted to prepare Ben to follow God, not us.

When Ben and Stacy started dating, we had new reasons to pray. How should we respond? Stacy was not a Christian. We didn't have any well-thought-out plan. But we trusted their relationship would end when they left for different colleges. We were wrong! Yet as Ben and Stacy's relationship grew stronger, God was working. Two years later, Stacy again sat in our family room. Joy filled the room as she told us what God had done in her heart and of her newfound faith in Christ.

We were thrilled and relieved—God had resolved our biggest concern. But when Ben and Stacy started talking of marriage, new questions arose. Would they rush ahead too quickly? Would their desire to marry jeopardize Ben's calling to seminary? How would a tender new Christian bear up under the pressure put on a pastor's wife? How would our two families navigate through differences in beliefs and traditions? And to



top it off, Ron and I were preparing to move overseas. How would the move impact our relationship with the newlyweds? How would Stacy and I learn to respect and value one another while 10,000 miles apart?

### *How Our Past Impacts the Present*

Another question hit me: What does a good mother-in-law look like? Not like me, I felt sure. Would I fail in this important relationship? I had no example to follow. As a young bride, my mother-in-law never showed interest in me. Perhaps she was simply too tired. Her children's sole provider, she worked extra jobs and sacrificed for others. Even in old age, she cared for her disabled son. I wanted to talk, but I didn't want to hear my mother-in-law's monologue about her struggles. After many years of trying to build a relationship, I gave up. Resentment built in my heart.

My mother and her mother-in-law also had a poor relationship. As a young child, I knew these two important women in my life had no love for one another. Mom enjoyed telling "humorous," hurtful stories about my father's mother—lots of laughs at my grandmother's expense. My mother's strong personality made it hard for my father to love his parents well. Did Dad really have to choose between his parents and his wife? Our family missed the blessing of a woman who embraces her husband's family as her own.

My problem went deeper than a lack of good role models. I was as flawed as my mother and mother-in-law. Before the wedding, someone told me a mother-in-law's job was to "wear beige and shut up." Did this advice apply to the rest of my life? What was I to do? I had reached a turning point. Good examples help, but good examples could not make me a good mother-in-law. Books about relationships may help, but I needed more

than a healthy relationship “how-to” manual. I needed my Savior!

Over the past twenty years, new questions still hit my mind and heart, and threaten to disrupt Stacy’s and my loving relationship. But I am learning to listen to the questions God has for me. When do I overreact? What have I misunderstood? Why am I more ready to defend than to listen? What sins in my heart would God show me and change through this relationship? I am still a flawed mother-in-law. But in my relationship with Stacy, I have discovered the joy of depending on God—his power and grace—as never before.

### Never Without Hope

Our first impressions give us a filter by which we view our future relationship.<sup>1</sup> A positive first meeting can give us hope for a healthy and even close relationship with our future in-law. It might make us eager for the next meeting, when we can continue to get to know one another and build a friendship. Yet a negative first impression can have the opposite effect. A discouraging and disappointing meeting can dash the hopeful thoughts we once had. Instead we might dread the next time we’re together—when the next hurtful word might be spoken. But God’s Word never leaves us in despair. Even if you have the worst initial impression of your in-law, God’s Word gives us hope for change.

Isaiah 43:18–19 tells us, “Do not remember the past events; pay no attention to things of old. Look, I am about to do something new; even now it is coming. Do you not see it? Indeed, I will make a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.”

Sometimes we can be stuck in a rut of how we view someone, assuming they’re always going to be a problem. We replay



the hurtful words or inconsiderate actions like a broken record. But this verse from Isaiah 43 challenges us to make a change. Instead of dwelling on all the negative interactions we have had, we are to make an effort to forget them, not even to consider them. We need to believe that God is doing a new thing, starting in our own hearts. He makes a way in the midst of our desert times and gives us reason to hope.

What could this look like in real life? For a daughter-in-law, it could look like picking up when your phone rings with your MIL's number lighting up. It could look like prayerful anticipation when you learn she's coming for a visit. It could look like counting down the days on the calendar with your children to help the whole family anticipate her visit—helping everyone's hearts receive her the way you'd want to be received (or talked about) before entering her home.

On the flip side, what if you're the MIL and it's your DIL who is coming to visit? When the negative memories of unkind words and thoughtless actions come flooding back into your mind, ask God to help you filter your thoughts. Think about what's kind and good and pure (Phil. 4:8). When she comes, notice when she gets things right. And even in the places she doesn't, practice the kind of mercy toward her that you want when you get things wrong sometimes (and the kind of mercy you were given from God—and needed from others—when you were in the green years of marriage or motherhood).

First Corinthians 13:4–7 gives us a great heart check of whether our thoughts toward someone else are loving. Am I being patient and kind? Am I envying or being irritable or insisting on my own way? *Lord, help me to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things and endure all things. Help me make room for her, for this relationship, for the ways you might change us both if we gave some space to trust you with it. Help me trust that you can do something new. Starting with me.* ✨

## Discussion Questions

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1. What was your first impression of your in-law? How did this experience shape your expectations of the relationship from that point forward?
2. In what situations are you tempted to despair because you are tired of waiting for God to act?
3. What mixture of faith and selfishness do you see in your life?
4. What challenges are you experiencing in your in-law relationship?
5. Have you made a wrong choice in your words or actions that have damaged your in-law relationship?
6. How is God meeting you in your place of sin, loneliness, or hardship?
7. Have you made any room in your head or heart for God to work in your in-law relationship? Or have you closed yourself off, expecting the worst? Why?



Whether you're a bride-to-be, a mother-in-law-to-be, or a woman who has been braving the in-law relationship for decades, **every daughter-in-law and mother-in-law needs help navigating their relationship sometimes.** Whether the struggle is one of feeling unseen, unheard, or unvalued, authors and in-laws Barbara and Stacy Reaoch have been there, and as they've put the Bible's wisdom into practice over the years, they've found that the in-law relationship can genuinely thrive in the midst of difficulty.

In this biblical, practical, and heartfelt book, Barbara and Stacy Reaoch share from their own twenty years of forming a mother-in-law/daughter-in-law bond. As you walk alongside them in their own journey and lessons learned, **prepare to be encouraged and equipped in these areas:**

- Expectations
- Conflict
- Suffering
- Communication
- Parenting
- And more

With the Bible as your foundation and this book as a helpful companion in the journey, take heart: a healthier relationship with your mother-in-law or daughter-in-law is closer than you think!



**BARBARA REAOCH**, author of *A Better Than Anything Christmas*, is the former director of the Children's Division at Bible Study Fellowship International. Her home is in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her husband Ron. You can connect with her at [www.barbarareaoch.com](http://www.barbarareaoch.com) and peruse her previous books.



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