



# Simply Salsa

Dancing without Fear  
at God's Fiesta

*Janet Perez Eckles*

Foreword by Kathi Macias

Simply Salsa: Dancing Without Fear at God's Fiesta  
Janet Perez Eckles

"It took me a long time to finish *Simply Salsa* because each insight touched me so deeply that I would have to stop and sob after almost every chapter. God spoke to me through its pages. After a year of being paralyzed with sorrow and depression, I was able to look up again and begin my healing...all because of this wonderful book!" Sand M.

Chapter 1: What Happened to Our Dreams?

When our lives are messed up with broken dreams and failed plans, we find it was actually our priorities that were messed up. We didn't follow God's order to first "Love Him with all our heart, with all our soul and all our mind."

Chapter 2: What's wrong with a *Vida Loca*?

Rahab, the woman at the well, and other examples of women today illustrate how they plunged in the *vida loca*, crazy life to cover their pain, disappointment or ugly past. But when God brushes His healing hand over their scars, they experience a vibrant new life.

Chapter 3: I hate it when He's Silent

In times of desperation, prayer becomes more fervent. But just as Hannah prayed for a baby and I prayed to see again, we find God's silence painfully disappointing. But joy comes once again when our faith increases not so much in the prayer while we ask, but in the peace while we wait.

Chapter 4: Negative Balance

When our *dinero* is gone, foreclosure and bankruptcy knock at the door. But in the midst of sobs, if we choose to

deposit a large amount of trust in God's Word, He brings back the abundance He promised: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the LORD Almighty" (Malachi 3:10).

#### Chapter 5: Why Me, *Dios Mio*?

The doctor told Diane she had three months left to live. Her rare cancer had no treatment or cure. But when God entered the consultation room of her heart, His diagnosis of healing and restoration defied her doctor's words. Five years later, she sings of His healing power. God's Word has the power to remove the sting from others' bleak diagnoses, discouragement, accusations or condemnation.

#### Chapter 6: A shark with his promises, a flounder with his commitment

**Infidelity in a marriage, loneliness as a single woman, or disappointment in the relationship with the man who conquered our heart, all put on us a heavy burden. Anxiety and worry steal our peace because we failed to first seek Jesus, the man who first conquered our soul. .**

#### Chapter 7: I Want What She Has.

Envy, a subtle and destructive force, overcomes us when we see what others have and realize what we lack. But when gratitude dispels self-pity, contentment becomes our friend, appreciation our companion, and joy in the Lord our partner in life.

#### Chapter 8: I Don't Deserve This

When unexpected tragedy blasts into our world, fear, sorrow and rage fill our days. But God's comfort, peace and

reassurance is available to us when we choose to be still and know that He is God—compassionate and powerful enough to sustain us through the heartache.

### Chapter 9: Forgiveness, the Beginning of Freedom

Injustice, malice or abuse can shove us into the prison made with bars of bitterness. But only when we forgive through the power of Jesus Christ can we enjoy the freedom to live again, liberated from resentment and anger.

### Chapter 10: Who Invited Fear to Our Fiesta?

Only when we let Jesus conquer our fears, anxieties, stress, shame, and loneliness, can we silence the demons that attack us. Then a simple salsa plays in the background as we let Jesus lead us through the dance floor of reassurance, confidence, significance and success.

“Simply salsa” available on Amazon, all Christian bookstores or at:

<http://www.janetperez Eckles.com/store/simply-salsa>

## Janet Perez Eckles

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## First Chapter

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# Chapter 1

## What Happened to Our Dreams?

In the face of adversity, if God is first, triumph replaces fear.

*Bueno, chica*, let's talk. The mariachi band playing our dreams has stopped. The music we once enjoyed has lost its rhythm. And the bad news blaring from the TV just adds to our personal troubles.

We sit on our unmade beds with a wrinkled tissue in hand and bite our lips. What went wrong? As little girls we felt destined for happy

lives of significance and success. But along the way, the world brought unforeseen circumstances, pain that shook our senses, and heartaches that left us numb.

*Buenas noticias.* I've got good news. I have a clue about where we went wrong. We all bought tickets marked "Happiness and Success" and boarded the train. The only problem was that we disregarded God's purposes and mapped our routes according to our own wisdom, past experiences, and expectations. And with hearts exploding with anticipation, we reserved window seats, hoping that when the train stopped, sweet happiness wrapped in prosperity and peace awaited us, just like the kisses of our *abuela* when we visited her.

I used to be on that train, bouncing on the seat while it chugged along. But, with no warning or preparation, a change in the route brought my train to a screeching halt. Heavens! The stop was so abrupt and violent it threw me out the window. And there I was—broken, lost, confused, and sinking into a puddle of self-pity. Physical blindness, infidelity, the murder of my child, and the acquittal of his killer—all these tragedies piled on one another in my own personal train wreck.

*Dios mio!* I cried to God, wondering if the Lord heard me, questioning the Spirit's presence. And that's when fear settled in. No more celebration of life, no more joy, no more fiestas with friends and family. Fear took over.

I didn't deserve this. I felt life had failed me miserably, and that stunk. I'd always been a good person, obeyed rules, took the dog to the vet, and even returned library books on time. *Que pasó?* What happened?

Perhaps you've asked yourself that same question. Whether you are Hispanic like me or not, I bet you've experienced "herpanic"! We all panic at one time or another when our life ends up in a mess. Cross-eyed with confusion and fear of tomorrow, we feel our dreams melting like *helados de chocolate* in July. And I have the feeling that our primary problem has nothing to do with extra pounds, lack of money, some big disappointment, or any other circumstance.

*Amiga*, it's time to figure this out. Grab your cup of *cafe con leche*, and let's talk about those times when we've ended up on the train track of disappointment while fear jeered at us. I know you've been there; we all have. And although my scars of hardship are visible if you look closely, I found the secret, the spot of hope, the security and safety we all long for...but not in the notions we grew up with. I found it in God's Word, the Holy Bible. With simplicity that soothes the soul, God reveals the solutions, not by changing our situations but by transforming our hearts.

*Muchacha*, for now, turn down that salsa tune, hold onto your sombrero, and settle into that overstuffed chair. We're about to find out what to do with broken plans and melted dreams. No matter where you are, even if your world is jammed with trials, God promises to reveal the secret to success, to lives of purpose, contentment, and confidence. God will show us how to move from a fear-filled life to a life that is faithful.

## Not Just Sweet Things

My lesson began when I left Bolivia and landed in the United States. When I was 12 years old, my mother, my 11-year-old brother, and I stood outside our La Paz home beside an old taxicab. With wrinkled fingers, my *abuela* gripped her white handkerchief and sobbed to *mami*. “Will you write as soon as you get there?”

Mami nodded, and tears shone in her eyes, too. With frail arms, my *abuela* hugged me tight, and her tears mingled with mine. I inhaled her stale perfume as she pecked my cheeks with kisses.

My heart ached at the separation from my *abuela*, the grandmother who used to soothe me with her stories and her readings from *Aesop’s Fables*. I thought about how, with rosary in hand, she would call us to kneel and pray with her. Her words were always gentle, and her love was like the soft, warm afternoon breeze of La Paz. And now we had to leave her behind—and for what? To head to the United States of America, the country where people say all our dreams will come true. That’s why Papi had worked for four years to gather the pile of documents the U.S. demanded. That’s why he’d endured many months of separation from us. It was all so he could go and prepare a home for us in this new land.

My brother and I sat on either side of our *mami* on the torn back seat of the taxi. I gazed out the window at the neighborhood playground, where weeds grew among spots of rocks and dirt. The worn swing swayed back and forth as if to wave goodbye to me, and the metal slide—slick down the center, with rusty spots along the sides—blinked dully at me in the afternoon sunlight. The playground’s shabby condition testified to both its constant use and lack of care. But this was my home, my neighborhood—familiar and comfortable.

The houses and dirty narrow streets of my childhood disappeared as the cab turned the corner heading to the La Paz airport. With the back of my hand, I wiped away tears while Mami patted my arm and assured me, “You’re going to really like our new home.”

Once we boarded the plane and took off, the small aircraft shook and dipped, making my brother sick at his stomach. I sat beside him, stuffing down a mixture of angst, fear, and apprehension.

The plane landed at a huge airport in Miami, a name that seemed funny to us at the time. We dragged our suitcases to the counter to be searched. A tall, fairskinned man, the tallest I’d ever seen, pulled our clothes from our suitcases. With a stern look in his eye, he grabbed a plastic bag of *chuño*, held it up in the air, and then turned it and examined its contents. Wrinkling his nose, he tossed it in the trash. He did the same with the spices Mami had tucked in the corner of her bag. These were the first of a myriad of items we had to discard from the lives we knew.

Now, four decades later I understand why God pulled me from the familiar and the comfortable. The Lord had plans for me. But *caramba!* The journey hasn’t all been easy. For reasons I don’t know, along with the many sweet moments, God’s plan mingled in some episodes that seared.

Has the Lord ever done the same to you? Have you ever been yanked from familiar, comfortable circumstances you never wanted to let go of? There you are, confused because you never imagined this turn of events. Why would God allow such ugliness to touch your life? How can a loving and good God plan that for you? These are essential questions for women of faith today, just as they were for women in biblical times.

## But There's a Reason

Ruth knew what it was like to face circumstances very different from what she'd hoped and planned. Remember Ruth? She was the *señora* who was suddenly left with no *esposo*. No doubt she knew grief. She must have felt lonely and maybe fearful of the future. But she did something most of us probably wouldn't have considered. I know I never would. Of all people, she clung to Naomi, her mother-in-law. Ruth insisted on following Naomi back to her homeland, a foreign place to her.

*Que?* What? That's an odd decision. Why would Ruth want to hang on to the mother of her dead husband? But God was working in her heart. God placed in her a desire to change the scenery, to head to a place where things weren't familiar.

But the path wasn't easy. Obstacles got in the way. Naomi didn't want to take her with her. Naomi asks, "Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?" (Ruth 1:11). Stay here and get a life, was probably her attitude. But something was burning in Ruth's heart that compelled her to stay with Naomi. I can imagine Ruth clutching at Naomi's sleeve as she declared: "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

God is wonderful that way. The Lord uses the circumstances of our lives—sometimes circumstances that are not so pretty—to fulfill specific plans, amazingly wonderful plans. For Ruth, it all started when God placed a hunger in her heart for something big. And that same sort of hunger rumbles in the deepest and most intimate place in our hearts, too. It pulsates with life at every turn; it calls us with relentless insistence. It begs to be recognized, embraced, fed, nourished, and fulfilled. Ruth had it. You have it, and I do, too. Actually, there's no one on this earth who doesn't have that longing.

What we desire is “purpose”—the kind of purpose that gives breathing to our souls, life to our days, and meaning to our steps. We long to discover the very purpose for which God created us. But what is it?

*Buenas noticias.* Good news. We don’t have to look for it. No need to figure it out or even define it. God did that for us. Jesus said the purpose of life—for you and for me—is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, and soul (Matthew 22:37).

Oh my, my. Did Jesus really say that? We are to love God with *todo*, our whole selves—heart, mind, and soul? What a huge task for *chicas* like us whose plates are full of chores, tasks, and demands from the *familia*. Maybe such devotion to God was possible in biblical times when they didn’t have the Internet, ATM machines, great sales at the mall, or careers to overload their time. But how can we love God that much, with that intensity, that commitment, and that depth? Heavens, that task is bigger than we can handle.

And that’s why you may have done what I did when confronted with that command: I accepted the “love God” part, but I subtly dismissed the “with all your heart, mind, and soul” as irrelevant or a bit antiquated.

There’s a reason many of us have done that. I believe we compromised and negotiated because we’re smart *muchachas*. We figured out that the only way we could obey Jesus’ command was to find our own way to love God. So that’s what we did.

First, we made sure we believed in God. If someone asked if we did, we’d nod our heads so emphatically that our dangling earrings would shake for a long while.

So, that first step has been taken. We believe in God. The second step is to go to church. We did that, too. We’d go, and we’d smile at those around us, and then come home with the satisfaction that we did more than most.

Next, we pray. Goodness gracious, our prayers are importantes, because that’s how we hand the Lord a list of what we want, need, and long for. But I did more than just ask God for what I wanted— I

always remembered to thank God for what I had. That took care of any guilt that might creep up. And, finally, we try—really *try*—to be good people.

So there you have it. We found a way to love God that would fit into our schedule. And maybe we've even convinced ourselves that it works for us.

## How Did We Do That?

Right about now, dip your tortilla in some guacamole and take a bite, because you'll need energy to swallow this truth: If we don't love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, we'll end up loving other stuff or people or dreams or aspirations or goals much more than we should.

Think I'm kidding? I know this truth from experience. This *chica* ended up loving her life more than God. I'm talking honestly here. I wanted my life to be painless, successful, prosperous, happy, pleasant, and peaceful. So I fell in love with the plans that would take me to those goals. I loved God, too—because I needed the Lord to make sure those plans worked out. I needed God's assistance in making my dreams become reality. Yes, I did.

*Amigas*, heat is surging from my chest to my head because I'm about to spill more gritty details. I started out by holding my head high because I was diligent in following the world's directives: Follow your dreams, don't let anyone stop you, craft your own plan for your life, live to the fullest, and enjoy life. What a logical approach, right? It was tasty and alluring, like my *abuela's* honey-glazed *buñuelos*. So I took a large bite of that “follow your dreams” pastry. Indigestion didn't come on right away because I made fulfilling those dreams my purpose in life, and I pursued it with great passion.

For many years, my efforts seemed to be paying off. I graduated from college with honors, and then found *mi esposo*, a man who fit

the criteria I'd listed in my teen years. I gave birth to three great kids— all healthy and smart. I went on a diet and exercised to recover my prepregnancy figure, and made sure I was the kind of wife who encouraged hubby to climb the corporate ladder, supporting him all the way up. Life smiled at me. We built a beautiful two-story home. I was doing what I wanted to do—staying home to care for my three sons. We enjoyed the amenities of suburban America and drove BMWs.

My life looked delicious, but deep inside me there was a hunger for complete satisfaction and peace. Nonetheless, I forged on, trying to quiet that “there’s got to be more” nagging. I bought more, decorated better, improved, fixed, and enhanced every area of my life the best I could. And day after day, I danced a complicated *salsa* to keep up with my daily desires.

## A Bit Desperate

Then, with no warning, like the sudden cold wind from the Andes Mountains, a shocking, icy gust chilled my world.

“I can see a definite decrease in your field of vision,” the ophthalmologist said. “There’s *nada*, nothing, anyone can do. You need to be prepared.”

I tried to ignore the queasiness in my stomach. I knew I had a hereditary retinal disease, but the doctors had told me it wouldn't affect my vision until age sixty. I was only thirty-one, and my sons were three, five, and seven. That wasn't fair. The doctors had lied to me.

But being the determined *chica* that I was, I stayed focused on my dreams. I kept on dancing to keep up the image of success. Yet from time to time, the thought of losing my sight made me stop in my tracks. And that's when I muttered sincere but desperate prayers—sometimes in English, sometimes in Spanglish.

Months swept by, and my nights became longer. I couldn't sleep

because my mind kept replaying episodes of that day when I'd run into furniture, into the kids, into open doors. I was losing more and more sight. Desperate, I dashed to anyone who offered even a ray of hope for me. But all the doctors, specialists, acupuncturists, and herbalists simply increased my frustration while decreasing the balance in our bank account.

Then, about eighteen months later, the day came when I awoke and, to my horror, I saw nothing. My world had turned black.

I shook my fist at God. *Por qué?* Why me? I didn't deserve blindness. I had begged for a miracle, and God had denied me. Anger, bitterness, and fear accompanied me as I groped through the house trying to care for my small sons.

There went my dreams, sliding down the tunnel of despair. My plans, longings, and desires vanished into a world that had become a dark prison with no hope of getting out. Fear of the unknown tormented me. How would I be able to live as a blind person? What would happen to my kids? What will my husband do with a blind wife? What purpose would my life serve? Those fears gnawed at me because the plan I'd made for myself didn't include this episode. I'd always been a good person. I felt I was being punished for something I hadn't done.

Then a drastic change came about. A friend invited me to her church, and I started attending with her. Often I would sit there cradling my pain, tears rolling down my face, and my heart exploding with terror. But then one day, during the church service, a Bible verse sizzled my heart, like water hitting a hot frying pan. It was Matthew 6:33, which says to seek God and God's righteousness first, and all our needs would be met.

There it was, a brilliant light of truth, of revelation and of freedom, shining through the darkness in my life. I had made the desperate search for a cure for my eyesight my number one priority, because without the ability to see, my purpose for life, as I had defined it, was gone. I had no goals, no passion, no hope, no joy; just broken dreams and failed plans. I was one sorry *chica*.

But God whispered, “Seek me first, love me first, long for me first, and fill your heart with me first; then you’ll see what I have in store for you.” That’s how I heard God’s promise to me. And that soft calling turned the key that would unlock my musty prison.

I dried my tears, gave a long sigh, and hopped in the back seat of the divine taxicab. As we drove away, I looked back through the window at the dirty playground where I’d once entertained my shallow dreams. I reviewed for the last time the rusty slide where my passion and my purpose had enjoyed the thrill of the moment. I took one last look at rock and weeds that were scattered around the life I was leaving behind.

With expectation before me, I arrived at the airport of God’s grace. The dreams I’d packed earlier were tossed away. I replaced them with a healthier desire to learn how to love God with all my heart, mind, and soul. That’s right—I said, “learn,” because just as I’d had to learn a new language and culture, I had to learn how to love the Lord...his way. Not halfway. Not my way. Not by doing what seemed most convenient or taking the shortcuts. I had to learn to love God with all my heart, mind, and soul.

It began in each morning as I directed my thoughts to the Lord, pondering on the Spirit’s sweet way of providing what I needed for that day. Then it followed by thanking God for the good things. Even if I had no eyesight, I still had ears to hear, legs to walk, a heart to love, a family to care for, and a future crafted by God’s own hands.

## A New Revelation

I found that when we choose to love the Lord, it sparks a hunger to peek into God’s characteristics: the unending compassion God has when we mess up; God’s immense patience during the years we chase our own plans; God’s stern words when admonishing against something that will cause us pain. And here’s a new revelation that entered my previously confused head: Loving God means spending

time soaking up God's Word. It means drinking in the promises of God's comfort when the world slaps our senses, when others reject us, and when pain comes even from those we love.

To love God is to trust when the Scripture says that if we invite the Son, Jesus, to be our Savior, we conquer death. To truly love God is to believe we can live abundantly, no matter what diagnosis, threat, or evil hovers about.

*Amiga*, maybe your situation isn't as drastic as mine. Or maybe it's even more painful. Life brings all kinds of ugly stuff. But the real *problema* is not our circumstances; it's how we respond. We must make the choice to leave the rusty swing set and the worn slide behind and move to a better land where God's purpose shines through the darkness and confusion.

That's what Ruth did. She was willing to travel to a new land, one that was unfamiliar but more promising. She wanted to follow God more than anything else. More than her comfort. More than her familiar home. More than her pride. And more than her own desires and hopes.

Bumps came into Ruth's life, and sometimes things were difficult as she followed through with her commitment. But God saw her heart, inhaled the sweet scent of her obedience, delighted in her trust, smiled at her humility, and sighed with pleasure at her grateful heart. The Lord revealed a solution for her dilemma that led to her becoming nothing less than a link in our Savior's lineage.

"Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul." This is the greatest commandment, the first, and the most important. And it's also the one God has put in place for our protection. Sí, this commandment is to protect us from confusion and fear. When we decide to love the way God commands, life becomes clearer. Whereas we once were blinded by storms, now we can see. We can gaze at God's healing rather than sink in sorrow. We can watch the trace of God's hand instead of succumbing to anxiety. And we can place our trust in the God who says, "I will rescue those who love me, I will protect those who trust in my name" (Psalm 91:14, NLT).

Initially, I viewed my blindness with shock. But God opened my spiritual eyes, rescued me, and scooped me up from the emptiness that surrounded me. And rather than feeling bitterness in my heart, I crossed the bridge from the blindness of my soul to the clarity of God's ways.

## And Then God Smiles

*Bueno, amiga.* It's time for you to close your own eyes. Lean back and think—really think. What circumstance in your life is God using to whisper to you? If you turn your head and listen, the Spirit's calling might be clearer than you thought. The Lord definitely longs to guide you to a life rich with God's purpose and abundant with God's wealth—a wealth that has nothing to do with a bank account, but everything to do with peace and contentment, no matter the situation.

God smiles when we make loving with all our heart, mind, and soul the top priority in our lives. Then, when we do experience moments of loneliness, God's secure arms are enough. When sorrow filters through, God's compassion whispers more personally. When the world rejects us, God's unconditional acceptance soothes more deeply. When a devastating diagnosis shakes us to our very foundation, God's promises resound more sweetly. When hopelessness mocks, God's power lifts us higher.

## And My Plans?

Perhaps none of this is new to you. Maybe you've heard it all before. But if you are like I was, a sliver of doubt is still poking through. And curiosity prompts the logical question. You sag your shoulders and ask, "What about *my own plans*?"

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord back to you,

“plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). Those plans are for you, for me, and for every *chica* who decides to dump the senseless notion that prosperity, hope, and a better future come from this world. We must scrap those misconceptions about what will give us significance and fulfillment. And with the same strength we use to remove the cheese stuck at the bottom of the tamale casserole, we must scrape away the “loves” that give us a false sense of purpose and satisfaction.

Now there’s room for the love for *Dios*. That’s when the music begins. The Lord guides you to the dance floor of your new life, sweet with purpose, significance, and grace. *Amiga*, the change in you will be so delightfully drastic that friends and family will take a second look at your radiant face and, with eyes the size of tortillas, will point at you and ask, “What happened to her?”