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WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Our airplane had landed in Las Vegas for a short layover and to load some new passengers headed to San Diego. For the first time in many years, I was flying by myself. My husband was sending me to visit my parents. The purpose of my trip was to spend time thinking, reflecting, and most important—writing. I was excited to have some time on the plane to begin brainstorming and thinking about what God wanted to say through this book. I felt like a kid in a candy store, giddy with excitement and almost overwhelmed with the freedom I had in my small but kid-free aisle seat.

As I read my magazine, I tried not to make eye contact with the passengers who were loading. I was hoping to keep the middle seat free to give my elbows and reading material some extra room. A young mother sat down in the row across the aisle and slightly in front from me. Her newborn was tucked snugly in the baby carrier that hung around her neck, and her toddler was in tow.

My heart went out to her. I remembered traveling alone with one child, then two, and then three. I had a momentary flashback of those pressure-filled moments from my early days of parenting, and the back of my neck started to sweat. Because I often traveled alone with the boys, I had quickly learned how to maneuver and prepare for the situations that occur on planes. I had my “little bag of tricks” that I used, but to be honest, I still get nervous about being on a plane with a child.

I don't think there's anything more demanding of your energy than a plane ride with your children. It's like being on stage. Everyone gets to watch what you do, hear what you say, and witness everything your children do. The worst part is when someone feels the need to evaluate your parenting skills and also your children's behavior. Some people are very understanding, but others can be downright rude.

I couldn't take my eyes off the sweet mother sitting across from me or the obviously annoyed passenger in the window seat on her row. I watched as the toddler began jumping up and down on the middle seat. She was so excited to be on a plane. Her smile was infectious but short-lived. Her mother quickly yanked her down and strapped her in. On cue, the newborn started to cry. I could feel the mother's stress growing and her patience shrinking.

An airplane is meant to carry all ages and kinds of passengers. However, most of us have felt the unspoken request either to medicate our children or to store them in the overhead bin so as not to upset others. There's a limit to what strangers should have to endure from our children, but some things are beyond our control. Our two-year-old once screamed during the entire descent of one plane ride.

The next day I took him to the doctor to find he had raging double ear infections.

Until you've traveled with children, it's difficult to empathize with parents traveling alone with children. I had been in this mother's shoes before, and I could feel myself starting to become tense as her situation escalated.

She began maneuvering the baby so that he could nurse, and the blanket she was using to cover them kept falling down. The baby's screams were growing louder, and by now the toddler had unbuckled her seatbelt and resumed her jumping. Between holding the baby, securing the blanket, and pulling her toddler to a seated position, this mom was at her wit's end. I reached up, placed my hand on the blanket over her shoulder and said, "I've got it."

When she turned around to look at me, I could see the tears in her eyes. She thanked me, and I continued holding the blanket until she could find a toy for her toddler and get her buckled up again. As the flight went on and the seat belt light was turned off, the little girl found her way to a standing position. She wasn't jumping, just looking—and our eyes met. I smiled at her, and she smiled back. Later on, the mother took both children to the restroom, and on their way back to their seats the little girl came to me, touched my knee, and said hello. I responded, and we began a conversation.

I offered for the little girl to sit next to me and play. Her mother didn't hesitate, and before I knew it we were playing with her dolls and coloring in her books. Once I knew the little girl was comfortable with me, I leaned forward, touched her mom on the arm, and said, "Why don't you rest a bit? The baby's asleep, and I'll let you know if your daugh-

ter needs anything. We'll be fine." The tears came again as she thanked me. In an instant she was fast asleep.

I didn't get anything done on that flight, at least nothing that I had planned on doing. But I think I was supposed to sit in that seat so that I could bring a moment of peace to that stressed woman. I wasn't a hero—I was simply available. I wasn't judging her—I wanted to help. I had a great time playing with the little girl, and when we landed I saw a different mom leave the plane. She was once again focused on her children and not the situation. Sometimes it's okay to ask for help. Sometimes it's okay to leave our plans behind and offer our help. It's true that we really do need each other.

We might never meet here on earth, but you're my sister in Christ, and you're my friend in motherhood. You're an amazing individual. You're blessed to be a mom. Some days you might feel as if you want to quit. But don't give up. You have the Creator of the world on your side. He's cheering for you. He's laughing, crying, and pressing on with you.

I love how our God gives us scripture that can be applied to so many different situations—even motherhood. In the Book of Hebrews Paul writes to the new church, asking them never to let go, never to give up. I can read these same words and apply them to how I feel as a mom, wife, and woman of God. Let's look at some of these scriptures together. As you read them, take time to let each word settle into your heart and become real in your mind. Here are Paul's words from Hebrews 12:1-3:

Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes

on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Those are such powerful words. They challenge my spirit and my life. I want to take some of the key phrases out and see how we can apply them to our journey through this book and through life:

Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses . . .

I see two aspects of this verse applying to our lives. The first reflects on Paul's challenge to the church. They needed to look around them and realize that they were not alone. Paul was often in prison for his ministry, but he knew that others were praying for him and that God was watching over his every need. We must believe by faith that we, too, are never alone. God is with us, and He brings friends into our lives when we need them most.

The second involves the witnesses. We have children witnessing our every move. They're listening and watching us to discover what it means to live a faith-based life. They aren't judging—just watching. We also have our friends who are witnesses to our triumphs and our trials. They can testify to God's amazing grace in their own lives and in ours. We need both of these groups so that we can always see the face of God surrounding us. In chapters seven and nine we'll examine different mothering styles and why it's so important to have friends we can count on.

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles . . .

A runner doesn't carry a backpack during a race; it would slow him or her down. We mothers need to look at our journeys and decide what we can do to lighten our loads. Whether it's reevaluating our schedules or changing our attitudes, we have to find a way to make mothering less stressful and make it easier to run this race. In chapters two, three, and eight, we're going to look at the different attitudes and actions that hinder us. We're going to name them and make a plan for conquering them. We'll throw off everything that can potentially turn into sin and entangle us to the point that we can't reach our end goal.

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us . . .

We need to adopt a new perseverance perspective. This kind of outlook focuses more on where we are headed rather than becoming overwhelmed with where we are right now. Our perspective will enhance our perseverance. We can keep going when we know that what we're dealing with will not last forever. In order to truly persevere without complaining, we must have a perspective that's focused on God's plan for us and not just our current situations. God's plan is different for everyone. Each of us runs a race that involves different obstacles. Some of us have been running a marathon, while others are running a sprint. No matter the race, we must keep our perspective and persevere. In chapter four we'll set some goals for ourselves. We'll seek out God's direction for our lives and respond by making a plan, so that no matter what happens during the race, our focus will be on Him and the end goal.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith . . .

Romans 8:28 says, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” We have been called to care for our children. We take care of our families because we love them and because the Lord is calling us according to His purpose. He is the author of our faith, and each day He is perfecting His will in us. We must fix our eyes on Jesus.

Our own mothers, our friends, even our favorite talk show hosts will give us good advice, but it’s not the best. God knows what’s best for us, and we must see ourselves through His eyes. In chapter ten we’re going to look in detail at our self-concept and the intentions behind our actions. Because we’re doing the Lord’s work, we want to measure our worth using God’s standards and not the world’s suggestions.

Consider Him [Jesus] who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart . . .

Jesus was perfect. He did nothing wrong, and He still came up against opposition. In chapters five and six we’re going to look at what kind of oppositions we face within our personal reality. We’re going to discover how to press on through this season of life. We’ll learn how to be busy without being distracted. Sometimes the days can seem endless and the tasks mundane, but we cannot lose heart. We’re running the mother of all races—literally. We’re on the front lines, and we need each other. By taking time each day to know our Creator in a fresh way, we’ll find His strength and presence to be all we need.

With God as our guide, we can put wonderful systems in place. We know our children better than anyone else. As an individual, you have the chance to reach out to other moms

for advice, and I hope this book can aid you in your journey as you become the mother you want to be. I pray that the thoughts outlined in this book will spark even more ideas that are better and bigger. I pray you'll find comfort, hope, and peace in the pages of this book. I trust God will create a thirst in you to find strength and guidance through His clear, quiet, and steady voice.

Within these chapters you'll discover new ways to plan activities in order to bring glory to God and peace to your home. You'll learn how to plan your day and evaluate the processes you use without trying to change the people involved in your daily life. This book is not about a clean house; it's about a clean spirit, a pure heart, and a focused mind.

Hebrews 10:24-25 encourages us to hold on to the hope that God promised. The writer of Hebrews challenges us to "Consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." What a wonderful challenge for women!

When I think back to the mom I met on that airplane, I can't help but smile. God used me to do a good deed, and I hope I was able to encourage her and give her a break. We not only need each other—we also love to feel needed. It's a beautiful partnership that God has given to women, and our community will continue to flourish as we nurture each other.

Reflecting on the past week, can you think of a time when you were spurred on by someone's words of encouragement?

Take a few moments to ask God to bring someone into your life who needs to be encouraged. Ask God to open your eyes to those moments and give you the courage to respond.

Whether it's a Sunday School classroom, playgroup, or Bible study, it's important we meet together. Pray for God to bring women into your life who will build you up and encourage you on your journey. If you have a group of women you currently meet with, take a moment to pray for each one by name.

TIME OUT

We're All in This Together

What a wonderful feeling—I've come full circle! Today I saw four pregnant women look up at me as I walked into the doctor's office. I must admit that initially I was very thankful I was not the one sitting there with swollen ankles, a flattened bladder, and the shallow breathing that comes with nine months of pregnancy. I'm finally on the other side of that, and I can pat the backs of women who are deep in the process and reassure them that this, too, shall pass. They'll not only make it—they'll be so grateful for the end result—a baby.

After enjoying this brief moment of relief, I looked at the women sitting around me with a kind of a nostalgic wonderment. We've all been in their shoes. Whether it was our first or fourth child, we've experienced the anticipation that comes as we wait for a child to arrive. Sometimes the only thought that helped me through the difficult days of pregnancy was the knowledge that very soon I would be holding a beautiful baby in my arms, and he was going to be mine. I have friends who endured months of legal, financial, and emotional turmoil as they completed the adoption process. The driving force behind their efforts was wrapped up in the hope and

belief that the child they would welcome into their home was the perfect child God chose for them. Both journeys included moments of waiting, moments of joy, and moments to dream about what it would be like to hold that child close and whisper, "I love you."

I wonder how God felt as He watched us prepare our homes, our bodies, and our lives to accommodate our growing family. I have to believe that He looks on us with a sort of joy and anticipation that can be experienced only by someone who has been where we are.

He's been in our shoes, and I believe He understands the hearts of mothers better than anyone. God may not have given birth to a baby, but He's definitely a creator and nurturer. He created the earth and watched it take form little by little. He even prepared the world for the arrival of His Son. Then He watched Jesus walk among us and, in the end, save us. God knows what it means to sacrifice everything for the love of His creation. Whether we became mothers through giving birth or through the adoption process, we came to motherhood with the same God watching over us.

God knew what was coming when He made us mothers. He knew we would be strong enough to handle it. But as our Heavenly Father, He's also ready to support us in any way that we need Him. Part of that support comes in the form of our friends here on earth. Our Creator knows us better than we know ourselves, and He never planned for us to do this on our own. He knew we would need someone here on earth, on the journey with us. He gave us our families and our friends. My friends, my playgroup, my Sunday School class, even the girls at the gym—they're all at the table with me. Within each other we find comfort, laughter, support, advice, and community.

We need each other. I need each of you. Let's pray for each other and lift each other up. Below is 1 John 3:18-20 as translated from *The Message*. Read it and reflect on it.

My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love. This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality. It's also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves.

TIME OUT

"Just"

Okay, here's a quick English lesson or refresher.

An adjective is a word that describes a noun, and an adverb is a descriptive word that relates to a verb. Only a handful of words in the English language can carry both labels. One of those words is *just*. For example—as an adjective it can describe an event or cause, as in "it was a just cause" or "the law is just and fair." As an adverb, it might be used as in the sentence "The arrow just missed the mark" or "We just saw the bus go by."

I think the word *just* carries more weight than some of us realize, and for the first time I felt its sting as it described me one night. I was so excited to attend an anniversary celebration for the school where I used to teach. I hadn't seen some of those people in almost five years. It was wonderful to see everyone, but I wasn't prepared for the line of questions I received. Their intentions were good, but it reminded me how quickly moms can be described with a *just*. One woman asked, "Are you just staying at home with the kids now?" A man took a bite of cake as he said, "Now, you're just a mom these days, aren't you?"

You know, I really didn't take offense (surprising, I know) to those comments. I don't think they knew how else to say it, and I don't believe they meant harm or were trying to minimize my role in society.

I truly believe they wanted to relate with me but didn't know what else to ask about. Truth be told, I was glad they asked about my kids, my house, and my life. At least they were interested. So I answered each question with an enthusiastic yes and continued to bore them with cute stories and the long list of duties that keep me not only busy but also fulfilled while I'm "just" at home.

I think one of the worse things I have heard is when a mom uses the word *just* to describe herself or her children. You see, if I say I'm "at work," that can mean a million things. If I say I'm "just at work" I kind of give the idea that being at work isn't a big deal, and I'm not doing anything important. Saying "I'm just a stay-at-home mom" almost portrays that my calling and my life have less value compared to the people around me, and that sentiment makes everyone uncomfortable.

Second Timothy 2:15 says, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." Wow! I'm supposed to present myself to God? Do I have to be showered, well-dressed, and wearing make-up? Does my house have to be perfectly clean? Do my children have to be well-behaved all the time? The answer is a resounding noooooo!

The scripture says to do your best, and *that* is what we're responsible for. We need to do everything we can to make sure we support, encourage, and provide for our families. Most importantly, we need never be ashamed of what God has called us to do, because we *are* doing our best. We are at

our best when we work together and support each other. We live our best life when we pattern it after God's commandments and Christ's example.

We know that God is faithful, it's our side of the presentation that needs to be better handled. God will show us what our personal "best" is and how to "handle it" by giving us the "word of truth" through scripture. In order to discover God's word of truth, we have to spend time reading the Bible; this is not an optional activity. No matter how busy our days get, we can accomplish our best when we take time to read the Bible and allow its truth to saturate our minds and strengthen our hearts. When we do our jobs—within or outside our homes—we need to go about our day as workmen that have been called and have a purpose. Our efforts will be approved by God because we're doing His work and doing our best.

You aren't just a mom, or just a wife—you're an amazing individual with a fantastic calling that only you can fulfill. My group of friends and I recently completed a Bible study on the Book of Esther. It's an amazing story about a queen who started out as "just" an orphan and ended up saving an entire nation. In Esther 4:14, Esther's uncle said to her, "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" When I learned about everything tragic and awful that had happened in Esther's life, I appreciated even more his wise words. We don't know what the day will be like or what the week will bring; but we do know that we were made for this time, in this place, with these people. Let's embrace each moment and know that God is with us the entire way.

I pray that you can see how God is using you during this season to help your family and to help others. He has wonderful things planned if we will continue to read the Scriptures and seek out His best. We're doing just the right job, and

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we're just the right kind of workers for the project that lies ahead of us. You are just the right kind of mom for your children, and you are wonderful!