



# Courageous

being daughters rooted in grace

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# Contents

Foreword	15
Preface: About Courageous Girls	17
Acknowledgments	19
Introduction: The Reality of Being a Girl	23
1. She Walks with Confidence	35
2. She Embraces Holy Crap	51
3. She Feels to Heal	69
4. She Tunes In to the Voice of Grace	95
5. She Knows Who She Is in Community	115
6. She Makes and Keeps Friends	141
7. She Is Fearless ... Almost	165
8. She Is His Beloved	185
9. She Dreams ... Big	211
10. She Practices Rhythms of Rest	227
Starting a Courageous Girls Group	249
If You Enjoyed This Book	253
Scriptures about Identity	255
Notes	259

# 1

## She Walks with Confidence

*She is clothed with strength and dignity;  
she can laugh at the days to come.*

Proverbs 31:25

*If you wanted to bring about a fundamental change in people's belief  
and behavior ... you needed to create a community around them,  
where those new beliefs could be practiced and expressed and nurtured.*

Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*

As you read this book, my prayer for you is that you would hear the heart behind it. No matter what you may struggle with as a mother or a daughter, I pray that you will know, without any shadow of a doubt, that you are loved. I believe that if you deeply understand *agape* love, everything else in your life will flow from that fullness. We can love others only when we ourselves are loved (see 1 John 4:19). We can give away only what we have received. Without love, daily life (and parenting in particular) feels painfully difficult. Christ came to bring us freedom; it is for the sake of freedom (freedom from

## Courageous

self-condemnation, shame, fear, and bondage) that I hope you receive these words.

It takes enormous courage to love and be loved well—not the kind of courage we muster for daring acts, such as skydiving or swimming among sharks in the ocean’s depths. Those are brave acts but not the variety that attracts everyone. The word *courageous* means many things in our culture today. Well-known author and sociologist Brené Brown defined it this way: “*Courage* is a heart word. The root of the word *courage* is *cor*—the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word *courage* meant ‘To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.’ Over time, this definition has changed, and today, we typically associate courage with heroic and brave deeds.”<sup>1</sup> I do not wish to speak about heroism or bravery. The kind of courage I discuss in this book comes from a deep awareness of who we are and to whom we belong. What if we knew that, because of our identity, we are *in courage*, so we do not have to produce it on our own? If we knew we always had a safe place to land, along with an endless source of strength, I believe we would be able to venture into unknown territories and live with greater meaning.

Recently, as I was having lunch with a friend and colleague, an elderly man approached our table. His thoughtful stare was noticeable; the skin around his eyes were covered with scars, telling a story of suffering. He held the rich wisdom of Oswald Chambers in his hand, a hint of abiding faith in old age. He spoke slowly, with steady intention, as if starting a sermon.

“In courage. In joy. To be in ...” He wrapped a piece of paper around his arm, repeating the word *in* and affirming that courage, comfort, joy, and peace are found in the envelopment of God’s love. He went on to say, “Enjoy. Encourage.” His words flowed from the depths of his soul. If not for the prompting of the Holy Spirit, I might have passed this moment off as a lonely old man merely

needing to be heard. However, something inside prompted me to pay attention. My friend and I thanked him for his wisdom, and I pointed to his worn book.

“Are your thoughts from Oswald?” I asked.

He looked me in the eye and humbly stated, “No, that was from God.”

I smiled, goose bumps rising on my skin. He responded with a quiet grin, and through his crystal-blue eyes, I could see a story of one who had been misjudged and overlooked. As he turned to leave, I said, “Thank you and *in-joy* your day.” I wanted him to know I had received his point.

A few minutes later he returned to our table to say, “Thank you for listening to my pearls of wisdom.” Since I am typically addicted to efficiency and averse to interruption, my manifest patience was a sign of God’s presence. “Of course,” I replied with a smile. I was struck *again* by how the simple act of listening to another human being can make for holy moments.

What if we lived as if we were already *in* courage, content to *in-joy* this life, apart from our own expectations and the expectations of all those around us? What if we modeled this lifestyle for our daughters and they began to live the same way?

## SHE GUARDS HER HEART

I believe this is the lifestyle of a Courageous Girl. Courageous Girls rest in God’s love and keep in step with His way of abundant living. From a biblical perspective, this means she stays in touch with every piece of her heart. She has learned to care for it, nurture it, and recognize what Proverbs 4:23 says about it: “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” In Old Testament Hebrew culture, the word we translate as “heart” is *lebab*, but it was

## Courageous

associated with the core of one's being: mind and soul. Another way of expressing the idea might be to say a person's gut or innermost hidden parts. Many times we think *heart* refers only to one's emotions, but this is a Western interpretation. When we read this proverb in the Hebrew context, we recognize that we should treat our whole selves like treasured diamonds because all we do and say flows from whatever lies within us—from the core of who we are.<sup>2</sup>

My daughters have seen many of the inner workings of who I am—flaws and all. If you are a mom, I imagine you may identify with part of my reality: the cranky mom battling PMS or confronting the cacophony of chores calling to me from every corner of the house; the short-tempered mom snapping at my husband or struggling to regain composure after telling my girls the same thing repeatedly; the anxious mom, worried about a school event or work project; the fearful mom, troubled about finances and long-term security for my children. My children know what I look like before makeup and how many times I've worn the same outfit multiple days in a row. They have seen me act unkindly toward family members during disagreements and have witnessed me giving my husband the silent treatment when my feelings have been hurt. They have seen me grumble, set boundaries, overwork, and then crash. They have seen my pride enliven me like a roaring lion and paralyze me like a stubborn mule. They have heard harsh words fly out of my mouth before I could respond to the Spirit's gentle voice—*Be slow to speak and slow to anger* (see James 1:19). I have not always modeled what I hope my children will know deep down in their hearts—that my love for them will always burn brightly.

But in my broken humanity, my children have also experienced my sincere apology many times. Asking forgiveness from our children, genuinely and humbly, is a powerful route to connection and trust. This shows them in a tangible, experiential way how God loves us, how we can be restored when we have done wrong, and how to reconcile

with one another. Following repentance, an actual change in behavior pushes me away from sorrow over mistakes made and propels me toward God. Yes, my children have seen my blemishes, but they also have experienced my desperation as I've fallen on my knees to hear the Lord. I desire for my daughters to see me wrestle with authenticity and vulnerability, both of which are difficult to cultivate and critical to healthy relationships. I secretly smile as they peek in on me and quietly sneak onto my lap for a cuddle as I'm curled up on the couch with my Bible, searching for God's heart, wisdom, and truth on good days and bad. I believe my daughters are experiencing me as a real person: one who is leaning in to love, surrounding my whole heart with both God and others, while being rooted in courage.

In our often routine daily lives—between laundry, dinner, basketball practice, gymnastics, dog walking, and homework—I hope my girls see me courageously standing up for those who are hurting. I want them to experience me loving deeply and grieving wholeheartedly. In the mess, I pray they see the beauty. My Courageous Mama prayer is that my girls (and your girls too) will see me (and you) modeling what it means to be a woman. The task is daunting, but I know God has honored me with it and therefore I must not take it lightly. Even more, I long to model for them the tangible ways that love overflows from the inside out; when I am filled with *agape* love, I am more likely to trust God's description of me as His child: "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14).

We each have a little girl inside us who feels courageous and whom God created to reflect parts of His character to the world around us. We do not need to be perfect. We are not even meant to be "good girls" who make good choices all the time. Courageous Girls are far more than their decisions, actions, words, mistakes, failures, and flaws; we are more than our threshold for temptation, and we are more than our sins. My dear friend Dr. Michelle Watson, an author and the founder



## Courageous

of the Abba Project, coined one of my favorite sayings: “My who is not what I do.” Try saying it out loud; go ahead. No one is listening aside from that little girl living inside you. To take it a step further, my who is not defined by anyone other than God, Creator of my life. There is great power in freeing myself from my own expectations and comparisons with others. It may sound easy, but we know it is not. There is something in our female DNA that simply cannot resist checking out the woman in line in front of us and comparing ourselves to her. The urge to find fault with other women is real and often leaves us struggling to create authentic friendships and maintain healthy, fulfilling, and edifying relationships.

### SHE VISITS ELI

Max Lucado wrote many of our family’s favorite storybooks. One of the most frequently read books in our home is *You Are Special*.<sup>3</sup> It’s about a town of wooden people who spend their days sticking dots and stars on one another. Those who make mistakes, are less attractive, or perform poorly compared with others receive gray dots. Those who are pretty or perform well receive gold stars.

The story’s main character, Punchinello, is constantly covered with dots and feels unworthy. One day he meets a girl who does not have any dots or stars on her body, so he asks her to reveal her secret. Lucia tells him to visit Eli, the maker of all the wooden people. Punchinello visits Eli and finds himself at the feet of a loving carpenter who delights in his presence, despite Punchinello’s dots. As Punchinello receives love from Eli, one of his dots falls to the ground. Eventually Punchinello learns there is no special formula for removing dots. Instead, relationship with the maker reminds each wooden person how uniquely special they are, and the security that comes from his love trumps the stickers’ power and relevance.

Hopefully, you can see Lucado’s metaphor. When we, as flawed individuals, spend time with our Maker, we are able to focus on how He values us and are less likely to possess self-limiting perspectives. While none of us enjoys receiving “dots” from our peers, it is certainly tempting to accept “stars” when they’re being handed out—student of the month, player of the year, employee of the quarter; life has a way of keeping us tethered to stars with an ever-growing list of ways to earn them. Have you bought into this? Are you striving to earn the praise of another person? Are you working to excel at something so that you can achieve a higher rank or more publicity? Think in terms of our children’s daily experiences. They have certainly bought into the world of stars and dots, undoubtedly because there is a deep hunger in our culture for stars. Why do they desire this kind of praise? Sadly, the more we hand out stars, the more our children thirst for them. Over time this thirst grows into an insatiable need that won’t go away (no matter how many Instagram followers you get).

The serious problem with this mind-set is that we cannot have one without the other. By choosing to accept the stars when people offer them and proudly wearing the symbol so that others can see our “worthiness,” we are, by default, posturing ourselves to accept the dots. We may try to refuse them, but they still stick. There is no shortage of dots, is there? We do not even need to list them; your mind (and likely your daughter’s mind) is full of them already. Moms, heed this warning: it takes our children accepting only one dot to destroy the hundreds of stars they may have already accumulated.

As mothers, we work hard to fortify our girls with compliments. We teach that words can’t hurt, though every one of us knows words can be like daggers. We try to armor them with the “right” clothes to wear to school to prevent verbal teasing or being left out. In trying so hard, we are still perpetuating the cycle of human-driven approval. Essentially, we hand out stars to our girls from birth in hopes of

## Courageous

keeping them from receiving dots. In our society it's really hard to escape others' attempts to tag us with dots or stars (or, in the world of social media, thumbs-up or thumbs-down). Though this human approval system is not new, it has become instantaneous.

The sticker trap imprisons us in a performance-based cycle of rewards and consequences. Sometimes this approach is repackaged as the tenets of Christianity, the “shoulds” and “should nots” of the faith. But I am certain this is *not* what Jesus intended to impart to His people. Jesus never judged based on productivity levels or assessed people by their achievements. He did tell a parable about using our gifts and talents (see Matt. 25:14–30), but He did not keep tally marks of who earned stars and who received dots to determine the love and attention He offered. God does not have favorites, and His love is not based on our merits.

Let me clarify that words of affirmation and compliments *are* important. Freely offering life-giving words of encouragement is vital to healthy development. Every girl still needs to hear that she is beautiful, smart, generous, or kind—though her worth is not based on such attributes. When we gift our daughters with words that speak to their value, regardless of performance, they will be able to release the power of stars and dots.

So how do we help our kids find their worth based on their Maker's point of view alone? It starts with us—parents. We begin by teaching our children that their value is defined *only* by the unconditionally loving God who knit them in the womb (see Ps. 139:13). You can teach this directly or indirectly to your daughter but only if you accept the truth yourself. How you believe the Creator views you will translate to what you prioritize in your life. In a world that wrestles with priorities every second, we must remind our daughters (and ourselves) daily to return to the Creator—through prayer, meditation, singing, playing, reading His Word, using our talents to

serve, and enjoying life. These are ways in which God intentionally pursues our heart. Remember, it is God's job to brush off the stickers that have been thrust on us. While we cannot control who tries to put stickers on us or our girls, we can determine whether or not the dots and stars retain their adhesive power. We do this by recognizing that we are created with purpose by a God who loves us and sees us as worthy through His Son, Jesus. The more we connect with "Eli," the more we can prevent the world's stickers from sticking.

Lucia, the female character in Max Lucado's story, is a terrific example of a Courageous Girl. She beautifully depicts one who chooses relationship with her Creator over definition by the other wooden people in her town. Lucia's relationship with Eli frees her to be all she is made to be. Sure, she stands out, but in doing so she points others to Eli so that they too can be free from the sticker trap.

The sticker trap burdens us with the three sabotages of true intimate relationship: shame, ego, and pride. In contrast, the Maker mind-set develops our resiliency against the temptation to accept outside judgments and pronouncements of worth. Developing Maker-mind-set resilience is hard to accomplish in today's world, but it is not impossible. The world is quickly changing, but the hard evidence of the great gospel message has never changed. I am confident that God's desire is not only to recognize our unmet needs but also to draw us close to Him, as daughters, so that we can be deeply loved. Our daughters will learn how to receive the love of God as they practice alongside us. We are their first picture of God as a relational, loving being.

## SHE LIVES LIFE

As our children's primary caretakers, we are their first relationship models. Our relationships with our children communicate the loudest message of who God is and who they are. Our daughters

## Courageous

will spend much of their adulthood either living out the messages we impart or trying to free themselves from them. Whether I am cuddling with my daughters on the couch or running around the house preparing for the next Courageous Girls gathering, I try to consider every moment an opportunity to disciple them. In all things, I am called to communicate and demonstrate the love of God to my family.

Here's the catch: I cannot be everything to everyone else *and* disciple my children well. No one can. Many try and fake it well for a while, but eventually something must be sacrificed on the altar of life. We try to juggle the endless demands and expectations of the world around us instead of stepping into the sweet spot for which we are uniquely designed. Competing priorities pull at us, promising that if we put our energies into certain endeavors, we will find fulfillment. Christians have even made up another set of standards that falsely promise, often through a 1-2-3 step plan, "If you ..., then ..." The truth is that there is *nothing* we can do to satisfy the world's expectations or guarantee outcomes, yet we still try. It's a dead-end trap to keep us frustrated and striving for validation. This way of thinking destroys us and distracts us from truly living.

In my life, letting go of this lifestyle has meant surrendering and accepting my specific call for today: to partner with my husband in our business; to see clients a couple of days a week; and to mother my girls intentionally through the treacherous waters of public school alongside a few other moms and daughters. I have stopped comparing myself with the blogging supermom and the Mother Teresa homemaker, though God bless them both!

For some moms, surrender means stepping down from a position at work. For another, it looks like working hard outside the home to make ends meet and put food on the table. For another, it looks like appreciating her marriage and small home while mothering three

children and homeschooling. We do not need to do it all or be it all. We are called only to be our authentic selves, and it takes time to discover who that is. Social media will not tell us the answers but provides only ideas, inspiration, and, at times, sensory overload. We each have our own way of being the mom our girls need to see, and the only way we know our personal path is to spend time connecting with our own hearts and the heart of God.

Fill in the blank in the following sentence based on something that feels true of your experience: “If I am not \_\_\_\_\_, then I am not enough.” Most of us can fill that space with several words that lead us to believe we are falling short. Here are some common answers: running my business well; attending the PTA fund-raiser; spending enough time with each child; sending out Christmas cards to my family and friends; providing permanent shelter for my children; fitting into my jeans; going to church; cooking a nutritious dinner every night for my family. The list goes on and on. How we answer this statement helps us determine where we find our identity and worth.

As you consider your statement, it’s important to remember that lies, shame statements, and distractions are not the truth that God speaks over us. We are made in the image of God, and His uniquely ordained purpose rests on each of us. There is no other *you* on the planet. There is no one else like your daughter. Caroline Leaf, a brilliant Christian neuroscientist and author, said it this way while I sat in the audience at one of her lectures: “You make a lousy me, and I make a lousy you.”<sup>4</sup> No matter what motherhood has stripped away from or added to your job description, no matter how many days end in tears while you kiss your baby’s forehead because you arrived home after her bedtime, no matter what your neighbor posts on Facebook about the camps she sends her kids to in the summertime, you cannot live your life comparing yourself

## *Courageous*

with others. The only way to settle this deeply human desire to compare ourselves is to turn our focus to God, follow what He calls us to do, and grow in the ability to celebrate what He is doing in others. It is so hard—but so good.

Get quiet. Can you hear God whispering? What purpose has He given you for this moment—not for tomorrow but for today? Here's the simplest way I can summarize God's response to me when I ask Him this question: to be courageous by being myself. It is a courageous act to be loved as I am and to love others as they are. I cannot do this perfectly, but when I can overflow out of my relationship with my Creator, I am enabled for courage. More importantly, I am equipped to engage the hearts of my daughters so that I can walk with them at every stage of life.

### SHE LIVES IN TODAY

How do we know how to enter into relationship with our girls, especially if they are going through a difficult stage of development or struggling with issues we never experienced in childhood (hello, iPhones)? The world offers many suggestions and well-meaning manuals to address this question. Some parenting models allow children to experience life on their own—entirely independent of their parents, saying, “They won't learn unless they experience it themselves.” An alternative extreme protects children from everything, so they enter the world without any life experiences outside those ordained by parents. Both philosophies leave our daughters vulnerable.

Following the wisdom of two of the world's leading experts in play therapy, Dr. Daniel Sweeney and Dr. Garry Landreth, I adhere to this approach: “Never do for a child that which she can do for herself.”<sup>5</sup> This principle helps children develop deep inner confidence unrelated to the praise of others. This principle also teaches adults

the importance of recognizing and educating ourselves about our children's current developmental stages. When we make ourselves attentive to our children, we can help them build skills and confidence, allowing them to practice new things or test new ideas within the safety of a relationship filled with love and limits. Being Courageous Mamas who invest in our Courageous Girls means each of us must take time to know our daughter's unique way in the world, help her build skills, and give her ways to practice and develop confidence within the safety and security of grace. This requires allowing extra time for mistakes, practice, and innovation.

To be truly honest, I struggle daily to prioritize this principle as well. Doing things for our children or missing an opportunity to come alongside them to encourage and train is far too easy in light of our busy lives. I still feel mommy guilt at times for doing something for myself or for serving various ministries instead of my family. I know the pressure to cook a nutritious meal so that my kids' memories of dinnertime are not only mac and cheese and reheated chicken nuggets.

Pausing long enough to look into my daughters' eyes at least once a day requires intentionality. I am slowly learning that living out who I am *and* being a Courageous Mama are one and the same. I am still in the process of learning how to accept that where I am is where I am supposed to be—a message I want all Courageous Girls to embrace. Grace meets us where we are and helps us grow from there.

There is so much to learn about being a daughter of the King of grace. The Bible tells us that each woman has purpose and is uniquely made and equipped to fulfill it. Her ability to fulfill that purpose is developed by spending time with God, sinking her roots into the truth that she is loved and boldly offering that love to others. This is what it means to be a Courageous Girl. Courageous Girls come in all



## *Courageous*

shapes and sizes, but the core of who a Courageous Girl is becoming can be summed up in the following acronym:

- C**—Confident in who God made her to be
  - O**—Open to those who are different from her
  - U**—Understands and applies God’s Word in daily life
  - R**—Risks because her faith is in a big God
  - A**—Asks for help (both in the form of personal prayer and within her community)
  - G**—Generous with her time and resources
  - E**—Empathetic
  - O**—Obedient to God
  - U**—Unique from the world around her
  - S**—Servant-hearted
- 
- G**—Good friend (even when it’s hard)
  - I**—Initiates with integrity
  - R**—Real and honest with God and others
  - L**—Lives and loves wholeheartedly

Finally, Courageous Girls are present. They are committed to continually shedding others’ expectations, and they fight to be in the here and now. They are responsible, are fully in tune with the Spirit, and bear fruit because of their relationship with Him: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another” (Gal. 5:22–26 ESV).

Paul spent many of his epistles urging both Jews and Greeks to live with freedom so that they would not be overcome by the sin, strife, and immaturity rampant in their cultures. The church of Corinth had been succumbed to strong sociocultural influences, and the church of Galatia was caught up in legalistic rules and doctrines adhered to prior to Christ. Sound familiar? Being a Courageous Girl is not for the faint of heart but for those who desire to be like Lucia: uninhibited by dots *or* stars—totally free. It is difficult to live as if we are truly loved. It is even harder to teach others to do this. It is a muscle that must be strengthened through practice and developed in our children in ordinary moments as we act out of the abundance of love we have received.

The following chapters unveil practical steps and activities for both you and your daughter to live as if you are loved so that you both can embrace courage. If practiced, they will help you create space for slow and steady shifts in your relationship. Spend a little time each day cultivating these important action steps, and consider discussing noticeable changes with other moms as you choose to live courageously.

### Takeaway

Make a list of five attributes you notice and adore in your daughter and five attributes you notice and appreciate about yourself. Try to keep your list focused on your God-given attributes (like wisdom or attention to detail) instead of temporary traits (like good grades or athletic achievements). Once you have a list for you and a list for your daughter, pray over these traits daily. Keep them by your bedside and ask God to develop them in you and your daughter. Ask Him to use these qualities to protect you both and build your resiliency. Pray that you would both see these gifts in connection with your God-given purpose and that you both

## *Courageous*

would be drawn to God's design with clarity and enthusiasm. Remember, you and your daughter are on a long journey to discover whom God made you both to be. Learning to stand tall in that design can take time.

### *Take It a Step Further*

Ask your daughter to write down five traits that she believes God gave her on purpose. How does her list compare with your list? Talk about what each of you wrote and how she shows her gifts to her family, to her friends, and to the outside world. If you can, model this activity for your daughter. Allow yourself to be vulnerable to your daughter, and share something you believe God gave you that is helping you live out your greater purpose.