

FOREWORD BY JAMIE IVEY

MOM

thriving with grace in the chaos of motherhood

UP

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FOUNDER OF THRIVE MOMS

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DAVID  COOK™

transforming lives together

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Part One

A Thriving Mom is
Made for More

Approximate Reading Time: 10 minutes.

Suggested Reading Location: In bed, favorite chocolate in hand.

1

Motherhood Shattered

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.

2 Corinthians 12:9

I was a great mom. I'm talking a *REALLY* great mom. I had all the schedules figured out; I knew how to keep the house clean. At the beginning of each month I prepared four weeks' worth of meal plans; every two weeks I rotated my kids' toys; and I posted regularly on Pinterest. I never missed a PTA meeting, and every morning I placed my kids' organic lunches next to their perfectly ironed clothes. You would have been blown away by my silky, clean hair and dust-free baseboards. I had it all together—and I was a great wife. My husband never had an empty underwear drawer and always came home to a home-cooked meal and a clean house. It was the stuff dreams are made of.

Then, I actually had kids.

For a few years, I held it together pretty well.

Our first child was a bit of a surprise, but a welcome surprise for sure. I'll never forget taking a pregnancy test on the morning of July 4, 2009. I had bought the test from a Dollar Store, and when it gave a positive reading, I didn't trust it. A year prior, just a couple of months after Brook and I had gotten married, I'd taken a similar test and received a false positive (apparently that does happen!), so I assumed that this test was also defective and that my hormones were just wacky. I tossed the test in the trash and headed out the door with my husband to a cookout with friends.

We lived a couple of blocks from the ocean at the time. As Brook and I lay on the beach that evening, watching fireworks exploding over the waves, all I could think was, *What if the test wasn't defective? What if it was really a positive? Could this actually be it? The beginning of our family?*

The next morning, I took at least four additional tests, all with positive readings. I was going to be a mom! That day was probably the best day of my pregnancy, because the next nine months were less than thrilling. I was violently sick until around thirty-two weeks. Our baby girl was in no hurry to join this world and stayed put until she was forcibly removed via a C-section from her cozy home at forty-two weeks (yep, you read that correctly).

Our Jessi Girl came out screaming louder than any baby I'd ever heard. When a nurse took her down the hall for further tests, I could still hear Jessi screaming. My doctor glanced over at me while she stitched me up, saying, "Wow, that baby has some strong lungs!" At ten pounds and already able to hold up her head, Jessi was nothing like the baby we had anticipated.

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The doctor told us that Jessi had colic, so we braced ourselves for months of crying, and she did just that. For. Months. On. End. I won't even go into the problems I had with breastfeeding her, because that's an entirely different story that could fill another book. I was off to a rocky start, but I was determined to figure things out. So, I quit my job and became a stay-at-home mom.

A miserable, unhealthy, stay-at-home mom.

Around four months in, Jessi stopped crying. It was like a switch flipped and suddenly I started enjoying having a baby to care for. I was still exhausted, but I was finally smiling again, sleeping again, and finding a bit of sanity.

Once pregnancy is behind you, you somehow forget about all the difficult parts. Brook and I wanted more kids, and we figured we might as well get it over with, so ... I had three babies in less than three years.

Three wonderful babies. Wonderfully exhausting babies.

And those years were a whirlwind.

Brook would come home from work, and I would shove the kids at him and run and hide. I spent as much time crying as our children did. Even though I had wanted to have kids, I hated every minute of motherhood.

I was failing miserably. I had been thrust into a role I was not prepared for.

Every time I had another baby, it upped the challenge of motherhood. I did my best to maintain my sanity and create a perfect picture from the outside. And for a while I even fooled myself. But as hard day followed after hard day, tiny cracks began

to form in my sense of worth, splintering my ability to feel dignity and joy. Over time those fissures grew deeper and deeper.

WHEN IT ALL FELL APART

I'll never forget the day I lost it. I had known something was off. The signs had been there for weeks—the obsessive cleaning, the need for everything to be just right—but I chalked them up to my perfectionist personality.

Then came the day I hurled a sippy cup of apple juice against the wall because my two-year-old couldn't clean up a mess correctly. What was happening to me? Who was this angry, self-absorbed person who couldn't even allow a child to be a child?

All I could feel was shame. God had blessed me with three beautiful, healthy children—why couldn't I enjoy them? What was wrong with me? Many women would give anything to have kids, but I couldn't shake the feeling that God had somehow messed up by giving mine to me.

I told myself things like:

Surely someone else could do a better job.

I am not cut out for this.

Why does joy feel a lot more like torture?

These and many other thoughts raced through my mind as I attempted to explain my feelings. People had told me, "If anyone can handle this, it's you!"—a compliment meant for encouragement that only served to make me feel guilty and "less than." I had been comparing myself with an image of a better version of me, and I let it defeat me.

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When I was diagnosed with postpartum anxiety and depression, all my fears about myself came to the surface. I wasn't the ideal mom I had tried to convince myself I was. I had worked hard at holding things together, always keeping my cool. As a popular mom-blogger at the time, I found my purpose and identity in the idealized image of picture-perfect motherhood that I wrote about. I had created my own motherhood dynasty, and now it was crashing down around me.

But I didn't want anyone to know that, because I believed I was a superhero. I was afraid to admit I was drowning. My chest was constantly tight from anxiety. I couldn't leave the house without gut-wrenching fear overtaking my body. I spent nap times sitting on our back porch, overwhelmed with panic attacks as Brook held my body and prayed that his wife would come back to him.

Driving in the car, I contemplated how I might hit a telephone poll at just the right angle and break my arm so that I could go to the hospital for a few days and have a vacation from parenting. Suddenly a trip to the ER sounded like a great option for my weary heart and exhausted body.

One evening after yet another panic attack, I was lying in bed, gripping the sheets tightly around me, when Brook came in to comfort me. With my face in the pillow, I screamed for this stranger to go away. I had no idea who my husband was. I didn't even recognize his face. The man who I knew better than any other person in this world was unrecognizable to me because of how broken I was in that moment. I felt nothing but fear and defeat.

For months and months, I went to sleep with fear and woke up exhausted, with no desire to get out of bed. My mind raced with the *what ifs* and a constant reminder of my failures. *What if I can't*

do this mom thing? What if I can't control myself and I hurt someone I love? What if I mess up my kids too bad? What if I'm not cut out for this to begin with?

My dreams of motherhood were shattered, and I was falling to pieces with them.

NOT THE WAY IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE ...

If you had known me when I was in college, you would have never believed that I would run a ministry for moms or write a book about motherhood someday. I had friends who were there simply to get their “MRS.” degree (you know, they go to college in order to find their husband so they can get married, have 2.5 kids, a house, a dog, and a picket fence). I remember feeling shocked when a friend told me my freshman year that she just wanted to raise a family and stay home with her kids. That seemed absurd to nineteen-year-old, determined-to-be-independent me!

I dreamed of becoming a magazine editor in New York, a wedding planner in LA, or the next Katie Couric. Sure, I wanted to have kids eventually, but they would come second to my career. Second to me. Building a life for myself was way more important than worrying about a husband or kids. When I did have kids, I would work hard in the corporate world.

That was my plan, and I intended to stick to it.

As you well know, that's not how my life turned out. Sometimes I hold that against my kids. I blame them for the fact that my life looks different than I thought it would. I get frustrated with them when I get nothing accomplished or when I can't keep nice things

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in my house because they end up broken after a game of keep-away from the little brother. I take the easy way out, settling for survival rather than doing the work needed to live in the freedom of who I am and where God has me.

As a new mom, I was given some painful and detrimental advice. Mom after mom told me that parenting is about survival, about simply getting through the days, the months, and the years. That it's about looking forward to bedtime, school, and eventually graduation, when your kids are finally out on their own and your life can begin again.

For a while, I believed this to be true. It had to be, because I was finding it hard to do anything other than survive. But as I surveyed the broken pieces of what I thought motherhood should be, I knew motherhood could not just be about getting by until my kids were grown. There had to be more. God had to have a much bigger and better plan in all of this, right? There had to be more to motherhood (and life!) than this. More than brokenness. More than survival. More than striving on my own strength. There had to be a better way.

After all, doesn't His Word tell us that His grace is sufficient for us, even in our weakness? In 2 Corinthians 12:1–10, Paul talked about boasting in weakness. Not for his own gain, but so that Christ's power might be made complete in him. That was my desire too. So I began asking the hard questions. What if God's grace really is sufficient—no matter the challenges we face? What if His power is perfected in our weakness? What if there is more to motherhood than just getting by? What if I could actually thrive in motherhood, even when it's hard? What if it's on me to step up

and chase after abundant life instead of hanging out at my own pity party?

These questions would radically alter the way I saw motherhood and put me on a course to discover the abundant life that God was offering.

Deeper Study

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1–10.

1. It's easy to believe that God's grace is sufficient when life is easy, but what about when things don't make sense? What are you facing that you feel as though God's grace can't cover? How can your insufficiency in your circumstances help you trust in God's sufficiency?
2. How can you find joy in your weakness, knowing that God is at work? Verse 10 says that "when I am weak, then I am strong." What does that mean to you?

Group Discussion

1. Before you became a mom, what did you picture motherhood would look like for you? How is that picture of motherhood different from what motherhood looks like for you now?

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2. If your ideals about motherhood were shattered today, how would your life change? Have you experienced this in some way? How has it affected you?

3. Do you believe the lie that motherhood is simply about survival? Before you read any further, discuss together and talk about any lies you believe about motherhood that may be damaging to you.

Take Action

Examine your view of motherhood. Are you living in survival mode? Are you ready for more from life than you have right now?

Before you continue in the book, write down a prayer, asking God to reveal to you any false images you have of motherhood that need to be shattered. Invite Him to work on your heart so the truths of this journey will soak into the shattered places and make you whole.