

You Bet
Your
Stretch
Marks

Abbie Halberstadt
Illustrations by Lindsay Long



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To Jennifer. You are the “gone-before” mama-friend of every girl’s dreams. Your grammar expertise, your enthusiasm and encouragement, your level-headed good sense—I cherish them all!





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Introduction



Can you tell your children not to SHOUT?!” The angry, decidedly French voice cut through the squawks and shrieks of our two-and-a-half-year-old twin boys, halting my husband, Shaun, and me mid-toy grab.

It was hour twenty-five of a bleary-eyed thirty-hour travel day with ten children in tow, and Titus and Toby were *done*. Done with snacks. Done with gadgets. Done with shows. Done. *Done*. DONE.

I was much too frazzled to notice the similarity at the time, but recalling that Eurostar ride now brings to mind a scene from an episode of *Gilmore Girls* (a series that I cannot recommend wholesale but whose machine-gun dialogue often made me grin). In it, Luke, the crotchety diner owner, tells his long-time crush, Lorelai, that the toy a frantic father is waggling in his child’s face won’t achieve the desired result because “Choo-Choo Joe” is dead.

That’s what it felt like in that moment of intense effort to entertain two little boys who had long since surpassed the limits of their ability to be cooperative human beings. Toys were dead to them. And despite Shaun’s and my best

impression of some strange two-headed octopus parent (we for sure were using our hands *and* feet), the exhaustion was winning.

But our French train companion was not the least bit interested in how long we'd been traveling, or in our obvious ongoing efforts to distract and quiet the twinbies (our affectionate nickname for our twin boys that distinguishes them from their twin sisters, whom we call the twinsies), or in the fact that our other eight children were doing excellent impressions of considerate humans.

She was interested in silence.

Frankly, Shaun and I were too tired and a bit too stunned by her sudden interjection to come up with, well, anything. We stared at each other in bemusement, a writhing, protesting toddler in each lap, wondering if she expected an actual response.

We quickly found out she did when, hands glued to hips, she shouted (yes, *shouted*), "YOU DO NOT CARE?!"

Shaun smiled wanly and, assuring her we cared very much, scooped up Toby and swayed down the aisle toward the dining cart. I stayed with Titus and the rest of our children, bouncing, shushing, and distracting him—a slightly easier feat without his brother there to pull his hair or take his coloring book.

Perhaps some of you are feeling a bit indignant with our French "friend"? (I'll admit I was.) Perhaps some of you are annoyed at us. (She certainly was.) Perhaps there are even more of you wondering what exactly in the literal wide world could have tempted us to brave so many hours on so many planes, trains, and automobiles with so many children. What could possibly make such an ordeal worth it?

The answer: a forty-five-day trip to Europe we had been planning for four years by the time it finally came to fruition, a trip that had already been canceled once by COVID-19 (if you've read *M Is for Mama*, you'll recall that sad tale). In other words, we were gritting our teeth through a *very* challenging short-term ordeal to be able to partake in a long-awaited adventure. As it so happened, it ended up being an experience that far surpassed even our wildest imaginings in the levels of joy, wonder, discovery, and—yes—difficulty we encountered. When all was said and done, it was *more* than worth it. It was an experience of a lifetime for our whole family.

But in that exact moment of angst and loopy fatigue on the train, it would have been easy to assume we'd made a mistake, to measure the rest of the trip by the reading on our current stress-o-meter, which was surely at the "too much, dummy, turn back" mark.

Except we couldn't turn back. We had spent the previous nine months researching, packing, praying, and planning to get to this very moment. We were all in, and retreat was no longer an option.

Anybody else think this sounds a bit like the entire all-in enterprise we call parenting?

We spend nine months feverishly researching, packing the birthing bag, praying, and planning to get to that moment when we finally make euphoric eye contact for the first time with the slippery soul we've been watching turn our bellies into an alien landscape of fleshy hills and valleys for so long.

And we know, in that moment of exhausted bliss, we are all in, and retreat is no longer an option. (Truly, from the moment of conception, it never was.)

We promise ourselves we will never be anything less than *the most* present, *the most* patient, *the most* invested mama who has ever existed. Because, no matter what we face, it *will* be worth it. How could it not be when holding this new little being is like holding a slice of heaven in our arms?

We mean every word. We do.

And yet, one whole week later, we find ourselves drowning in an existential malaise of adult diapers, upside-down days and nights, milk-stained tees, and quick bites of our husband's leftover toast. It's worth it, we remind ourselves. It's worth doing *the most*.

We begin to hit our newborn stride. We witness that first gassy, lopsided smirk, and our hearts melt like butter left too close to the griddle. We get four uninterrupted hours of sleep for the first time in a month, and we're sure we could cure world hunger with the energy and mental clarity we've achieved.

But then along come toddlerdom, the sassy five-year-old stage, prepubescence, and—oh dear—the dreaded teenage years.

Each stage has the potential to chip away at our resolve to be *the most*, and, although I'm not usually one to blame "society" for all our woes, I'm sad to

say moms are much more likely to encounter “French woman on the train” energy than a “trust God, Mama” response when we find ourselves flailing in uncharted, stormy mothering waters.

And so we begin to doubt our wisdom in committing to this child-rearing thing. What if we royally flub the whole business? What if we’re remortgaging our house to pay for three kids’ worth of therapy in ten years? (If parenting articles are telling it like it is, this will *definitely* be true.) What if that commitment to *the most* was just our mushy hormones lying to us?

What were we thinking?

Well, friends, maybe we were thinking this: “Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward” (Psalm 127:3).



*“Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.”
(Psalm 127:3)*

Maybe we felt the Holy Spirit tapping us on the shoulder one night in the middle of a panic-scroll nursing session that had us convinced we could *never* be enough for this bundle of humanity in our arms and saying, “You can do *the most*, and you will still never be enough. But that’s good news. Because I am ‘able to do far more abundantly than all that [you] ask or think, according to the power at work within [you]’” (Ephesians 3:20).

Maybe we just need to keep our eyes fixed on the bright horizon like the brave mouse, Reepicheep, in C.S. Lewis’s *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and declare with him:

Where the sky and water meet,
When the waves grow sweet,
Doubt not, Reepicheep,

To find all you seek,
There is the utter East.¹

In other words, there may be a poopy diaper (or three!) at our feet, but there is “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow”² if only we can keep our chins up and our eyes trained on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith.

Even with an eyes-up approach, will we still struggle?

Yep.

Will we stumble and fall?

Of course.

Will it be painful and hard at times?

Without a doubt.

But will it be worth it? For us? For them?

You bet your stretch marks!



Titus Two Perspectives



One objection I've encountered through the years since I began sharing what the Lord has taught me through motherhood goes something like this: “I need to know how her kids turn out as adults before I'll listen to anything this lady says.” I get it. I, too, find myself craning my neck to see the “finished product” of my friends' parenting. And while I do have older children, including a legal adult (and another who will join him very soon), I thought it would be valuable to include end-of-chapter contributions from older moms than I who share my conviction that our work matters and is worth the daily investment. I asked thirteen wise, godly, committed mamas whom I get to call friends if they'd share perspectives from their experiences as mothers of adult children. To my delight, they all said yes! Some are authors and speakers. Others are close personal friends. One is my own dear mama. All have beautiful words of encouragement for you from which I know you'll receive so much goodness. Enjoy!



A Titus Two Perspective

SEPTEMBER MCCARTHY

author, podcast host, mother of ten



I still do a head count when we leave the house, sit down at a restaurant, go to church, or shop as a family. I have yet to cut back on how many people I cook for, and I still wake up thinking about every single child I prayed over and laid down to bed every night for the last thirty-two years. Seven of our ten children have moved into adulthood, yet I am still their mother. Are there things I would change? You betcha. Are there things my kids would have wanted me to change? No doubt. But the only good thing about looking back is to see how motherhood changed me, grew me, and stretched me. As my body bears the marks of motherhood, so does the imprint of my commitment to bear down on the hard and holy moments, to give my children life—a full life, with no regrets. Now, living in the abundant fruit of perseverance, holding on to hope, ignoring the naysayers (because they weren't sacrificing sleep, tears, and finances for my children—I was), and leaning in to the biggest and most beautiful thing I have ever done with my life: when God made me a mother.

As a mom to ten amazing and very different children, I am now watching the next generation unfold, currently with twelve grandchildren and counting. I have learned that looking forward and not back is the very thread of hope and help that carried me to this moment in time as a mom. I knew that defining motherhood by a bad moment, a horrible day, or a season of exhaustion would reap nothing but discouragement and despair. I chose to think forward—to

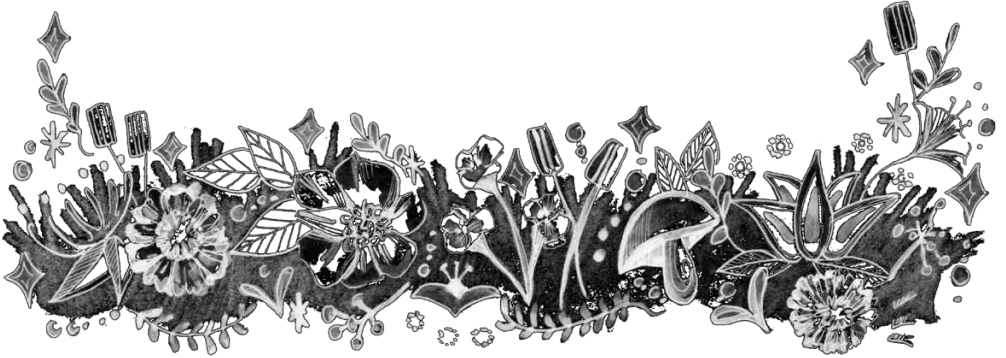
watch the women before me who exuded patience and a calm exterior in the face of big (and small) challenges and who raised good and godly children who still love her despite her own insecurities, doubts, or bad mom days. I deliberately made each day its own, creating and re-creating our rhythms until it all came together. Motherhood never looked the same from one day to the next. There wasn't a formula but rather a foundation on which I laid my head to rest every night, along with the lives of my children. I had Jesus, the One who had me and my motherhood. Every time I gave Jesus my children's lives, He gave me new hope for a new day. He gave me a future, which I am now living in the present. I am abundantly blessed and still shaking my head at how God could use my yes to motherhood, each and every time. Now, here I am, with no regrets.

As each chapter in this book unfolds, bearing the fruit of saying yes to motherhood one day at a time, you will read from other seasoned moms, giving you a forward vision to hold on to. Motherhood is reclaimed with words of wisdom, testimonies of help, hope for you, and a new vision for what “can be,” rather than what the world may tell us “should be.”

As you read the culmination of each story shared, I encourage you to remember the daily choices and surrenders of the hardest days, to bring them to a place of abundant blessing. We have one of the grandest jobs ever—enjoy it.

CHAPTER 1

An Eternal Investment



Did you know “child-free living” is a trending topic in online forums like Reddit and Quora as of the year of our Lord 2025?

This may sound like an odd question with which to kick off the first chapter of a book that seeks to demonstrably assure you that investing well in your children is, indeed, a worthy pursuit.

But hang with me for a minute.

Because I doubt there’s a reader who hasn’t, for at least the briefest of moments, imagined how different her life would be without her children.

Before you fire off an angry email saying, “Not me, Halberstadt! I would never!” keep in mind I didn’t say our imaginings had to be positive (or negative, depending on your perspective). I’ve conjured images of a child-free existence more than once in an attempt to grapple with the contemptuous attitude toward children I’ve encountered in internet threads like those I just mentioned. In a viral video, comedian Chelsea Handler boasted of her ability to do “whatever the #\$%* I want,” including references to ingesting cannabis when she wakes early, going back to sleep until noon, and pursuing other forms of “entertainment” I’ll

pass on mentioning. For the sake of intellectually grasping the appeal of the completely self-focused existence Handler describes, I've contemplated the prospect of Saturday lie-ins, vacations on a whim, and food prep for only one.

But not once have I reached the conclusion my life would be more joyful, more fulfilled, or more character-rich without children in it.

Easier?

Well, that, my friends, is a horse of a different color.

If you've read *Hard Is Not the Same Thing as Bad*, you're fully briefed on my stance on easy versus worthwhile. (And if you haven't, you might be surprised, given the title, to know I don't think the two are mutually exclusive.)

The thing is, we don't just encounter "child regret" in the questionable morass of anonymous misery one-upmanship that overflows these message boards. Sometimes it comes from a much more unsettling source.

The Children Are Not The Problem

One morning, as I was doing some work in my "girl cave" (my pet name for the closest thing I have to an office), I received an email from a mom who was struggling. This, in itself, is not uncommon. In fact, I would say 50 percent of the messages I receive could be filed under the "struggling moms" tab. Parenting is challenging, and we all have questions.

But this email was different. The writer mentioned listening to a podcast in which I was elucidating just the premise of this book—that children, while capable of stretching us to our limits (and beyond), are worth the effort.

She let me know that, while in most cases she would agree with me, her own circumstances precluded such a conclusion.

She wasn't a "regular mom." She was a mom struggling with disabilities. She didn't share a diagnosis, but she detailed a many-years-long fight against symptoms of fatigue and debilitating pain. Her circumstances would be (and had been) challenging for a single person without children.

But they were infinitely more so now that she did have children.

So, why did she have children at all? Well, because she got married, and

that was the next logical step. And also because the women at her church had told her that it would be worth it. That no one ever regretted children. That she would never get to the end of her life and wish she'd spent more time on herself and less with her children.

I think we've all heard similar sentiments, and while I wholeheartedly believe the seed of truth in them is robust and fruitful, they also can ring a bit hollow when we're in a place of overwhelm.

Sometimes we need to take a moment to remember those in-the-trenches years and find our compassion. As I read on, though, I felt my sympathy for her struggles begin to morph into concern.

You see, she wasn't just messaging me to ask for prayer or to get advice or even to vent. She was writing because she believed I'd overlooked something crucial to the "kids are worth it" conversation.

The missing element? The fact that no one is telling women with disabilities they shouldn't have children. She thought I was just the one to remedy the problem.

She was a Christian, she said. And before children, she'd had the ability to rest and recharge enough to be a blessing to members of her church community by making them meals or visiting the elderly at home.

She considered these worthwhile efforts (as do I), and she resented the fact that her very small children's constant neediness gobbled up the scraps of energy she managed to conserve on her best days, leaving her with nothing to offer anyone beyond her own household.

She acknowledged her husband was selfless and giving, helpful around the house, and patient with the children. She noted her church was supportive—often chipping in to help with chores and childcare. The "problem" was her children. Their needs were constant. She could no longer recover for several days at a time to regather her strength. She couldn't be her best self. They were whiny and unappreciative of what little energy she did have to offer.

She was convinced the very people to whom she had ministered in the past and who now served her in her time of need had bamboozled her into an enterprise on which she should have never embarked.

And she wanted me to set the record straight. Motherhood is only “worth it” for the able-bodied, the pain-free.

Perhaps most worrisome of all was her contention that, whereas children are not guaranteed to receive Christ, and are therefore (according to her) dubious beneficiaries of our care and effort, people who already are Christians are worth the sacrifice.

Friends, I recognize this is a unique (and biblically twisted) perspective, but it speaks to some underlying assumptions many of us can harbor—regardless of the obstacles we face in motherhood—without even realizing it.

Just a few to consider:

- Children “keep us” from _____.
- We would be better Christians if only we didn’t have these babies at our feet getting “in the way.”
- Children are not as worthy of our best efforts as adults are (because grown-ups can better recognize and appreciate what we have to offer).
- The older ladies who tell us it’s worth it just don’t “get it” anymore.

Convinced I needed to at least try to break through this desperately unhappy woman’s determined narrative of “buyer’s remorse,” I emailed her back, expressing my compassion for her struggles and gently reminding her that her children would not always be so time-consuming and that, were she to see them as a worthy investment of even her smallest kernels of energy, she would, I wholeheartedly believed, begin to see the fruit of her efforts.

The Most Important Work

Shaken by the interaction, I asked my online community for feedback from moms with disabilities. Did they agree with the notion that a “children are worth it” stance needed to come with an “unless you’re disabled” caveat? Or did they find the energy expended on their children well spent, even if it looked different from what their friends with fewer physical struggles experienced?

To a woman, the responses were unanimous.

Yes, it's *hard work*. And much more so when we battle migraines or autoimmune diseases or mobility issues. But none of these factors change the fact that the precious children God has given us merit every bit of our energy and more. That shepherding their eternal souls, far from pointless and inferior, is the best use of our time in this season of having children at home.



The precious children God has given us merit every bit of our energy and more . . . shepherding their eternal souls, far from pointless and inferior, is the best use of our time in this season of having children at home.

Their responses immediately brought to mind this iconic quote from Dr. John Trainer: “Children are not a distraction from more important work. They are the most important work.”

Of course, we know, from a biblical perspective, the most important work is truly to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind . . . And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37, 39). But a perspective that skips over the closest neighbors we will ever have (namely, the eternal souls who sleep in bed with us or a few rooms away) to run eagerly toward the ones on the other side of our fenced yard will rob us of a “first things (people) first” approach to loving our family well.

Perhaps one of the staunchest proponents of children as a worthy investment I know—even amidst intense physical struggle—is my friend Taylor Brenner, whom I also referenced in *Hard Is Not The Same Thing as Bad*. Taylor began her arduous journey to motherhood in a wheelchair as a foster (then adoptive) mama. Her inability to walk resulted from a cliff-jumping incident

gone horribly wrong. The agony she has endured to complete daily tasks staggers the imagination. And yet she has responded to the opportunity to mother a sibling group, who have become children of her heart if not of her blood, with the kind of steadfast commitment to excellence that both inspires and convicts me. Hearing the joy, pride, and dogged commitment with which she speaks of her children—all of whom come with struggles of their own due to the circumstances that necessitated their foster placement—always spurs me on to be more intentional with my own blessings.

And then? The Lord blessed Taylor with a miraculous pregnancy, which doctors had told her was all but impossible after her accident. But even that came with significant challenges—namely, hyperemesis gravidarum (a condition that causes excessive, repetitive vomiting for multiple months throughout pregnancy, sometimes even leading to hospitalization for dehydration) and a complicated delivery due to her many surgeries and pelvic floor instability after the accident.

And yet? I can only imagine the look of disbelief Taylor would give me were I to have the audacity to even imply that, because of her health challenges, she *shouldn't* be a mother.

Her incredulity would be fully warranted.

A Regrettable Regret

Of course, in a culture that champions self-love as the highest form of enlightenment, it should come as no surprise that some would deny the truth that “children are always worth it”—not just for those who suffer physical limitations but for anyone who wakes up one morning and concludes, “You know what? I just don’t like being a parent. Sure wish I could have a do-over because I would choose to skip it, given the choice.”

Think I’m exaggerating?

Sadly, no.

In a *Time* article entitled “The Parents Who Regret Having Children” (which popped up as “recommended news” on my phone one day), the electively

childless author made a case for destigmatizing an attitude of remorse for having had children.¹

Intrigued, I read it from start to finish, determined to understand a mindset I'd previously encountered only in fringe emails, angsty message boards, or one-off newscast invitations to debate a "child-free lifestyle advocate." Surely, in committing myself fully to this article, I would uncover some shred of relatability or have the briefest "aha" moment of clarity. Surely, the sole reason for its existence couldn't be so brazen as "kids are hard, and I wanted more time to myself."

I was wrong.

In each example in the article, the anonymous regretful parents asserted the primary reasons for their disappointments stemmed from the feeling of having "lost out." Sleep, advanced degrees, free time—all seemed tantalizingly out of reach after becoming parents, and all the more to be mourned.

One mother, who made it clear she would "never ever" make the choice to be one again if afforded a second chance, pointed out her own childhood was affluent and carefree, which led her to believe her experience as a parent should be the same.

When it wasn't, she felt duped.

Citing the endless mothering duties of chauffeur, chef, psychiatrist, physician, confidant (and so on) as the cause for her grief, she made it clear that, though she never wanted her children to know of her remorse, she felt her time would have been better spent doing none of those things.

The author of the article was quick to note that, while parents feel hesitant to express such thoughts out loud (for fear of social censure), there are more of them than we think, and they deserve to be heard without any shame strings attached.

Who Is at the Wheel?

Here's the thing, friends.

If we enter parenthood expecting uninterrupted access to our childless

“privileges,” we *will* be disillusioned after a single week of sleepless nights and diaper changes on repeat.

If we engage in one of the most virtuously self-denying undertakings with “Self” at the wheel, in the passenger seat, and taking up every spot in the back of the minivan (or stylish SUV, if we’ve promised ourselves we will never stoop to “minivan mama” status), we will resent any little stowaways on board our Craft of Conceit.

If, however, we approach the monumental task of nurturing, protecting, and helping shape the bedrock beliefs of *another human being* with enough humility to admit we might (just *might*) receive more, learn more, grow more, laugh more, cry more, and, yes, *love more* (not less) in the process, there’s a very good chance we’ll be right.



*If, however, we approach the monumental task of nurturing, protecting, and helping shape the bedrock beliefs of **another human being** with enough humility to admit we might (just **might**) receive more, learn more, grow more, laugh more, cry more, and, yes, **love more** (not less) in the process, there’s a very good chance we’ll be right.*

That’s the nature of expectations. We so often find that which we seek.

Now, I’m not one to “manifest.” To do so would be to contradict clear instruction from God’s Word. In a culture inundated with memes about “claiming our destiny” or “trusting the universe to bring the success we deserve,” James 4:15 counters with a sober-minded right hook: “*If the Lord wills*, we will live and do this or that” (emphasis mine).

However, Jesus says, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not hinder them! For the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these,” (Matthew 19:14 BSB). It is not ungodly manifesting to agree with Him by acknowledging the fact that children hold great worth as image-bearers of our Creator and are and will be worthy investments of our time and resources.

That’s the kind of “name it, claim it” energy I can get behind!

It’s a fact reiterated in Psalm 127 (which I mentioned in the introduction): “Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with [children]! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate” (verse 5).

Perhaps, then, it is not our offspring who have robbed us of, well, anything. Perhaps it is a mindset of impending disappointment that steals our joy and replaces our vision for legacies built with regret for leisure time lost.

Human but Hopeful

Before you snap this book shut, convinced I must never have experienced any despondency as a parent, let me be clear that neither my husband, Shaun, nor I are exempt from parenting burnout. More to the point, we’re perfectly capable of falling prey to an attitude of self-focus that narrows our view to one of petulance at missing out on certain experiences.



Perhaps, then, it is not our offspring who have robbed us of, well, anything. Perhaps it is a mindset of impending disappointment that steals our joy and replaces our vision for legacies built with regret for leisure time lost.

We have squabbled over whose turn it is to stay home while the other has a night out with friends, been bad-tempered when a hike with complaining

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FIRST—IS, IN FACT, A NATURAL OUTFLOW OF
THAT LOVE FOR HIM.



children takes three times longer than it “should,” and sighed with relief as the last child’s “night night” fades into the corners of a blissfully quiet house.

In other words, we are human. We experience periodic exhaustion and disbelief that a particularly onerous stage has dragged on longer than we dreamed possible, same as you.

But we have also gasped in delight as a minutes-old baby claims our hearts with a simple cocooning of our pinky fingers in her feather-soft hands. We have felt our chests swell fair to bursting as our six-year-old hoists one of his twin toddler brothers on his back to save tender feet from “pokies” in the grass. We have joyfully witnessed an entirely unique bearer of the *imago Dei* blossom as a young adult in his God-given interests, talents, and giftings.

And we have often locked eyes, shaking our heads in wonder at the incredible privilege of *getting* to raise our children.

And so, my friends, despite a pendulum that seems to be swinging steadily in the “ew, pass” direction when it comes to children, I say it again: Investment in eternal souls is the worthiest pursuit beyond our primary calling to love God first—is, in fact, a natural outflow of that love for Him. And if the Lord sees fit to grant us eternal souls to shepherd in the form of children here on earth, the only way we will miss out is if we fail to recognize that we will take neither “me time” nor nicer furniture nor “trips of a lifetime” nor spotless car interiors to heaven with us, but instead only those everlasting souls whom God calls to Himself, at least in part, through our steadfast witness of love and instruction in His ways.