

Praise for *The Fight to Flourish*

“My wife didn’t want to write this book. She was too busy living out its message—fighting to flourish. I am constantly amazed watching her go at it hammer and tongs, whether facing grief, our family life, or in our church as we pastor together. No, she didn’t want to write this book, but that is precisely why it is so important that she did. This is no abstraction full of theories or poems you are about to read. *The Fight to Flourish* is a tear- and blood-stained playbook that has helped her face both victory and defeat with grace and grit, and it will help you do the same.”

—Levi Lusko
Jennie’s husband

“Each one of us eventually comes to a point in life when we are feeling weak and broken and don’t know where to turn. We desperately need to hear a voice of truth speaking life to us in those times. Thankfully, Jennie Lusko steps up to be that voice for us in *The Fight to Flourish*. Jennie has walked through the valley in her own life and is a friend who has certainly strengthened me with words of hard-fought hope. In this book you’ll treasure, she will help you press in and press on to live a life that looks a whole lot more like flourishing than it ever did before.”

—Lysa TerKeurst
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author
President of Proverbs 31 Ministries

“Jennie and her husband, Levi, have been part of our extended family for a few years now. Their story of courage and perseverance in the midst of loss is inspiring, to say the least. I am confident that Jennie’s story, perspective, and wisdom will bless multitudes. Life does have its shadowlands, yet there is always hope. I believe that *The Fight to Flourish* will be hope in darkness and hope in the journey for many.”

—Bobbie Houston
Co-global senior pastor, Hillsong Church

“Jennie Lusko is a woman whose life reflects the miracle-ground forged when grace and resilience hold hands. The harvest coming from that ground—tilled, broken, planted, and watered in seasons of real, hard life—is something beautiful to behold and utterly God-glorifying. As you lean into the tested and lived-out lessons from this book, may hope and grit rise up in you as the Lord deposits courage in you for your own fight to flourish.”

—Brooke Ligertwood
Head of Hillsong Worship

“Sometimes God knits friends into family. It’s extraordinary, really, and we treasure having Jennie Lusko and her family as our people. Jennie’s book, *The Fight to Flourish*, is a brave and faith-filled story of how to fight forward toward the flourishing version of yourself that God created you to be. Jennie, filled with sweetness and boldness, allows God to move powerfully in the midst of devastation and chooses to author a story that loudly echoes His glory. Way to go, Jennie. We love you.”

—Shelley Giglio
Cofounder of Passion Conferences and Passion City Church

“Jennie Lusko embodies this message of flourishing unlike anyone else I know. Her life has blossomed, not just in spite of her great struggles but right through them. Jennie invites us into these transformational lessons learned with hard-won wisdom and supernatural grace. This book is a priceless guide for any hurting heart longing for more.”

—Katherine Wolf
Author of *Suffer Strong* and *Hope Heals*

“We’ve all experienced some type of heartbreaking loss that only God Himself can lead us through. That’s why Jennie’s book is so necessary. She beautifully shares how, even when life isn’t what you imagined it would be or should be, it is possible, through God’s love and tender care, to take flight once again. If you’re feeling weary, exhausted, busy, or if you’re carrying a weight too great to bear, this book will show you the way.”

—Roma Downey
Emmy-nominated actress, producer, and
New York Times bestselling author

“God has plans for each of us that far exceed anything we could ever ask, think, or imagine. *The Fight to Flourish* will encourage you to hold on to God’s promise of an ‘exceedingly abundantly more’ life, even when yours feels completely out of reach.”

—Christine Caine
Bestselling author
Founder of A21 & Propel Women

“The words in this book carry such honesty and offer true strength. Jennie so beautifully shares how you can thrive in the middle of those things you never expected would become part of your life. If you are ready to shed your burdens and step into a flourishing life, read this book. It will bring a freedom you never knew was possible.”

—Alex Seeley
Lead pastor of The Belonging Co

“Maybe you feel like you’re in a losing battle and have hit the ground too many times to count. Jennie Lusko has been there! Ready to discover the ongoing strength she found? Jennie wrote *The Fight to Flourish* as a charge to reengage life with renewed vision and confidence.”

—Amy Groeschel
Cofounder of Life.Church, author, and founder of Branch15

“Everyone has a desire to flourish. To thrive and be successful. However, no one is exempt from the sting of pain. There’s a decision between the place of pain and promise: to fight forward or to remain discouraged. This book speaks to that place. And I can think of no one better to speak to that place than Jennie. She is the fiercest fighter I know! I believe this book will equip you for the life you are called to live.”

—Julia Veach
Lead pastor of ZOE Church LA

“We all want to flourish, but few are willing to fight for it. Through Jennie’s powerful words and real-life experiences, she walks us through the work that is required to revive our roots to blossom and bloom. The teaching is profound, but her life lives a greater story. I believe this book this book will pour Living Water onto dry ground.”

—Bianca Juarez Olthoff
Church planter, teacher, and bestselling author of
Play with Fire and *How to Have Your Life Not Suck*

“Jennie Lusko’s faith cannot be ignored. It is raw and real. Both bold and beautiful, her faith shines more brightly through her sorrows than her successes. The untimely loss of her daughter Lenya thrust Jennie into the public spotlight, making her internal agony a grief observed. In this gut-wrenchingly honest book, Jennie lets us watch her mother’s heart ache and break, and then witness God remake it into a sacred place of worship.”

—Lenya Heitzig
Author and speaker

“As Greg and I have personally experienced, life doesn’t always turn out like you had planned. It didn’t for us when, in 2008, our son Christopher was suddenly called to heaven. Levi and Jennie were there for us in ways that mattered most.

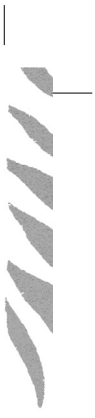
“In this book, Jennie shows us how one can not only survive but flourish in dark seasons of suffering. Jennie Lusko is not only a dear friend to our family but one of the most beautiful examples of a wise and godly woman with a strong message of hope.”

—Cathe Laurie
Founder and executive director of Virtue for Women

“Jennie has so beautifully lead by example what it means to embrace the fight. This book will challenge you to get some grit to ‘fight to keep fighting’ and yet still remain sweet and pliable in the hands of the Father. It’s a reminder that while anchoring your roots down deep to flourish can feel overwhelming, He is in the deep with you.”

—April Carter
A close friend of Jennie’s

**THE
FIGHT
TO**
Flourish

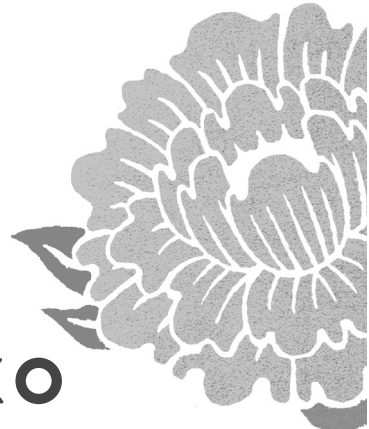




**THE
FIGHT
TO**

Flourish

*Engaging in the Struggle to
Cultivate the Life
You Were Born to Live*



JENNIE LUSKO



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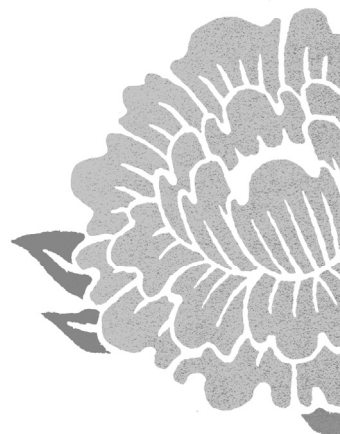
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To my husband and best friend: Levi, you have seen every angle of my personal fight to flourish, and yet you're my biggest encourager. Thank you for reminding me to stick to the plan.

To my sweethearts—Alivia, Daisy, Clover, Lennox, and you, too, Lenya: You have helped me in my journey more than you know.

I sure do love you, sweet fam of mine.







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Foreword

A few days before Christmas we heard the news: Levi and Jennie Lusko had lost their five-year-old daughter.

My husband, Steven, immediately called Levi. Their conversation was short, maybe ten minutes long. He listened to Levi retell what had happened, then he told him we were so sorry and that we were praying.

When he got off the phone, he handed me Jennie's number and said, "I told Levi you would call Jennie."

Panic. Why would he volunteer me for that? I didn't know what to say. I didn't know her that well. We had met only a few times. What do you say to a woman who has lost her child? How will she even go on from here?

So I did what any brave but nonconfrontational person would do: I texted her. I wrote something like this: "Hi, Jennie. This is Holly Furtick. Steven gave me your number. I am so, so sorry to hear about Lenya. Please know that I am praying for you and that I am going to be sending you scriptures here and there. No need to respond. I cannot imagine your pain. We love you guys."

I had no idea that text would be the beginning of a very special friendship. Over the past several years, Jennie has taught me how

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to fight when you have every excuse to give up. I have watched her fight for her marriage, her children, and herself. She could have turned inward, pushed everyone away, and succumbed to bitterness, and no one would have blamed her. But something in her decided to fight to live—and not just to live but to flourish. Somehow she tapped into an inner strength and continued to fight day after day, and sometimes moment after moment.

Jennie wasn't okay. She was far from okay. She was broken. But she leaned into her pain rather than avoiding it. And she allowed her brokenness to help her experience the presence of God like never before. There is nothing like watching your friend bravely face the darkest season of her life. In a way I've never seen before, Jennie leaned into her pain and then pushed through it.

Many times I've seen grief flood Jennie's eyes mid conversation. I remember one particular time we were in a green room at a church where both of our husbands were ministering. We were chatting and getting to know the people in the room when someone casually asked Jennie how many children she had. It's a common question, but it carries so much pain for her. Graciously, but with tears in her eyes and a smile on her face, Jennie replied, "I have three on earth and one in heaven."

Jennie doesn't avoid places where people might ask difficult questions. She is a woman who understands that, although her life will never be the same, she *can* thrive in this new place.

Pain and suffering are a common denominator in life. No one is exempt. This book is for anyone who is looking for a guide to help them navigate their pain. Jennie has earned the right to speak into your life. She teaches from experience. If she can fight through the most unimaginable pain, so can you. The stories that Jennie recounts in this book are raw and honest, and I'm

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confident they will give you the handles you need to face your own situations.

Lenya's life here on earth was tragically cut short, but she lives on through the pages of this book. And I believe she is looking down from heaven proud of her momma who had the courage to fight and the fortitude to write down her story for all of us.

—Holly Furtick
Elevation Church, Charlotte, NC





Introduction

I Feel Like I'm Failing

It's been six days since our five-year-old daughter, Lenya, died without warning. Six days since I snuggled her close. Six days since I heard the sound of her raspy voice.

The hundred-year-old theater is filled with row after row of people we love, but I don't remember seeing anyone's face. More occupy every inch of standing room. They gather with our family to celebrate the life of our little girl.

As musicians take the stage, the movement and whispers of the crowd dull. Guitars strum melodies honoring the Giver of life as the voices on stage blend with the crowd's, creating a beautiful harmony. I hold my husband's hand. The other I raise in worship, my heart riding the swells of awe and sadness, gratitude and loss.

As the music tapers, the moment comes for my husband, Levi, and I to walk on stage with our seven-year-old daughter. Levi briefly introduces Alivia, who opens her iPad and begins to share about her best friend and sister. Her words (which were well thought out, then written, and then typed) prompt tears.

Then, it's my turn. Heart racing, I try to catch my breath.

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Truthfully, I don't want to say anything. I don't even feel like being there, let alone lending my voice to pour out my heart to hundreds of people through a microphone. That's my husband's job. He's the pastor, he's the professional preacher and teacher who speaks every week, not me.

Today I have the privilege of standing on that stage, celebrating the life of Lenya and sharing about my God, whom I don't understand but whom I trust.

Knees buckling, I lift the microphone to my lips. No words come. Instead, tears fall. To try and stop them is pointless.

There's no way I can do this. Who can blame me? Surely no one expects me to say anything anyway.

But there's something in me telling me I can. And I should. And how can I not? Levi whispers into my ear, "The same Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is in you. You can do this."

Fighting back the tears and the instinct to run away, I fill my lungs with oxygen, and as I exhale, my balance steadies. Words begin to flow as I share how I loved being Lenya's mom.



This was one of the first times I remember fighting against my feelings. I didn't want to get on stage and talk that day, but I knew I needed to give my heart a voice. Not just for the people with us but for my sake. I needed to make known my walk in the valley of the shadow of death and declare that God was there—and that He was good. It was in the grief that I learned to fight forward and to fight through. Little did I know that the fight would continue. And little did I know that the fight was what I needed to flourish.

My fight to flourish has stretched beyond the loss of my child.

It has become the everyday struggles for patience, passion, purpose, and peace.

The truth is, I usually feel like I'm failing in some way every day. I see who I want to be: The happy, sweet, sexy, laughing-out-loud kind of wife. The tender, confident, fun, strong mom. The thoughtful, wise, present sister and friend. This is the best version of me, the one who thrives in all she does. She also seems unattainable, out of reach, and it's so discouraging. How can I grow when I don't feel like I'm growing? How can I succeed when I'm facing a struggle of some kind every day, whether I'm late to another appointment or losing my temper with my kids?

I used to think *flourish* was a word that would never describe me—not until heaven anyway. And then I learned something that totally shifted my perspective. The word *flourish* in Hebrew is *parach*, which means “to revive, blossom; to sprout, shoot; become apparent, break out.” The Greek version of this word, *anathallo*, is used only one time in the New Testament, when Paul said, “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity” (Philippians 4:10). You may have known that verse to say “revived” instead of “flourished” if you've read it in a different translation. This is the essence of the same word in Hebrew, to return to a former state of being.

And here is where we learn that the word *flourish* is pretty spectacular. When God calls us to flourish, it doesn't mean to become something brand new. It means to revive, to bring back to life what and who we were meant to be. We weren't created to become something totally different but to become what we were originally designed for.

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I love how most grocery stores sell plants and flowers. Makes it easy to pick up butter, broccoli, Taco Tuesday ingredients, and a happy house plant all in one trip. If you walk into a home improvement store, you won't find guacamole, but you'll find a huge department that exists to provide everything you could possibly need to start your own garden: gnome statues, wind chimes, watering cans, potted plants, flowers, and packets with seeds so you can grow your own plants, trees, flowers, herbs, fruits, and vegetables. How do you know what kind of seed is in each packet? Easy—there's a picture on it.

You gently open the packet, careful not to lose any seeds, and look at these tiny, generally not pretty, seemingly insignificant specks. It doesn't seem possible that these puny seeds will grow into the beautiful picture of the sunflower or the zinnia portrayed on the outside. No way. Can't happen. Yet somehow, it does.

The picture of the fully grown, lush specimen of botany is what you are meant to become. It's you. But you're also the seed. It's you too.

God sees you as that picture. You're not quite there, yet you are already there. Confusing? I know. It's a spiritual paradox. But wait—there's more.

The picture on your packet is the true version of you. And the only way to become the version of you that you were born to be is to be found in Jesus Christ. The picture is actually of Jesus.

Romans 8:29 says, "For he knew all about us before we were born and he destined us from the beginning to share the likeness of his Son. This means the Son is the oldest among a vast family of brothers and sisters who will become just like him" (TPT).

You are made in the image of God, in the image of His Son. Do you know that in Christ you are perfect? When God looks at you, He sees Jesus—and Jesus is the picture of what it means to flourish.

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The Bible teaches us that when we surrender to Jesus, we are, in a moment, made righteous. We don't earn salvation; we believe and receive freely. We don't pay for it—not with money, not with the good things we do. It's purely a gift from the God who loves us. We're covered by the grace found only in Jesus through His death and resurrection. And in that moment of salvation, we're made like Christ. So when God looks at us, He sees Jesus. That doesn't seem possible to me, but it's the way God does it, and it's beautiful.

But until we get to heaven, where we will truly be perfect like Jesus, we're still here, in these imperfect bodies and minds. We're in a period of sanctification. That's a fancy way of saying that, yes, we're already in Christ, and yes, we're also still in the process of becoming more like him—right now. We're living in the dash between the date of our birth and the date of our last breath on earth. That last breath will lead us to our first breath in heaven with Jesus. But we're not there yet.

Does flourishing in this life seem out of reach? It often feels like that to me. I often feel an underlying sense of guilt because I'm not measuring up and I'm not where I thought I would be. If only there wasn't such a struggle in my soul. The great news, though, is that we are actually in the process of flourishing right now, whether we feel it or not.

A seed is destined to become a mature plant, but it requires the right soil, water, air, light, and temperature. In this book I want to help you understand that a fight “breaks out” (*parach*) when the seed hits the soil. It's not just go time; it's grow time. And that means it's time to fight.

I suspect that you can understand the reality of the fight through the filter of your own story. I love what 1 Timothy 6:12 tells us: “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to

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which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (NIV). This word *fight* in the Greek language (in which the New Testament was written) is *agonizomai*, and it means “to fight, to contend, to strive as in a contest for a prize.” We see a tension here between faith, receiving the gift of salvation given by God, and the action of fighting and taking hold of the life we were born to live. We receive freely, and we also act vigorously.

The author gives us a real-life picture of fighting the good fight of faith with everything we’ve got, to strain to obtain the prize. This resonates in my heart because two of my favorite things are boxing and spin class. Do I love punishment? No, but if I need to stay healthy by exercising, then I want to at least have some fun while doing it.

These workouts show me what I have in me. I can do more than I think I can. I can push myself a little more than it may seem. I can work really hard, and then see the results—getting stronger and gaining endurance. I realize not everyone loves to exercise, but if you stick with me, I want to show you some of the truths I’ve extracted from pushing myself physically. I hope to help you see that you indeed have grit. And that you can grow it. You also have the stamina and endurance to grow stronger in whatever you are facing right now, good or bad. I want you to see that you can fight, that you can grow, that you can be fruitful, and that you can flourish.

You may feel as though you’re not flourishing *because* of the fight, *because* of the struggle. But it’s the embracing of the fight that will create the space to flourish. A fight for honor. A fight for a sweet spirit. A fight to choose to get uncomfortable. A fight to keep fighting. Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Jesus doesn’t mention overcoming the trouble; He tells us He has overcome the

world. We want Him to take away the trial, but He’s taking care of the even bigger picture: the world our trouble is in.

I once went out on a limb and started a garden. Keep in mind, it was a tiny one, about two feet by four feet. I envisioned the kids picking strawberries for their yogurt and granola every morning, and me collecting tiny leaves of parsley and mint to flavor sauce and salads. From my backyard to my table—that was my dream.

It was a good little garden, for a brief moment. Things grew—and then they didn’t. Or they died before they could thrive. Bless the little garden’s heart; it barely provided the things I wanted most. The strawberries were tiny and the herbs were few. It had grown, but it had not flourished.

God doesn’t want us to barely peek through the hard soil of life like a tiny weed or a puny bunch of strawberries. He wants us to shoot through the dirt and grow into a tree with deep roots, a thick trunk, strong branches, and most of all, fruit. He wants us to grow luxuriantly. How do I know this? He told us clearly in Psalm 92:

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,
they will grow like a cedar in Lebanon;
planted in the house of the LORD,
they will flourish in the courts of our God.
They will still bear fruit in old age,
they will stay fresh and green,
proclaiming, “The LORD is upright;
he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.”

(vv. 12–15 NIV)

The progression of action in this psalm could be wrapped up like this: God plants, God waters, we receive, and we flourish.

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Palm trees know how to stand their ground. They can grow as tall as two hundred feet and can endure tropical storms. Palm trees may bend, but they will not break. Their roots grow even deeper over time. They may take years to grow, but they last for centuries. They produce sweet fruit like acai, coconuts, and dates.

Cedars can grow to be 130 feet tall with a trunk diameter of over 8 feet. The ancient cedars of Lebanon have existed for thousands of years, surviving wars and storms, even outlasting empires. Because of their high-quality, incorruptible timber, these trees were the first-choice material used to build temples and palaces.

Cedars flourish in cold mountain climates, the kind that my family and I live in now in northwest Montana. I am always amazed how the trees—especially the deciduous ones, the ones that lose their leaves—stay alive in the winter. When autumn sighs to a close and the trees are done showing off their most beautiful and brightest colors, it looks like they die. There's no life left in their empty branches—or so it seems. But what's really happening is dormancy. The trees are in a period of rest. The life source within them focuses its energy on keeping the trees alive during the brutal winter months.

Much like the growth of these legendary trees, we, too, are meant to fight to grow and to bloom. To push through our small and seemingly insignificant seedlike stages. To persevere through the dirt and mess, through the growth and beauty. To experience the strength to live the life that God has designed for us, that He can see even if we can't.

Someone recently asked me if I'm a green thumb, and I replied that I'm more of a green eye. I don't grow things very successfully, but I know a happy house plant when I see one. I just love greenery and plants and trees, and I'm a botanist at heart. I don't know everything about botany, but I do know that seeds don't all grow and

bloom at the same rate and at the same time. A palm tree takes four to six years to fully mature, but a cedar can take multiple decades. The queen of the Andes, a rare forty-foot plant that thrives in harsh climates, flowers just once and only for a few weeks in its eighty-to one-hundred-year lifetime. There are seeds that even need strange elements to germinate, like some Australian plants that require the heat of fire.

And just like seeds germinate and mature at different rates, we each flourish in our own way and in our own time. There's no room for comparison. We are each running or walking or even speed walking in our own soil, at our own pace, in our own seasons, with our own unique DNA. I don't have to have the same stride as you. You have a different stride from me. And that's okay.

I recently hiked a mountain with my friends. At the start of the hike, there were two trails to choose from. One was lush and green and dotted with flowers. Birds sang in the trees lining the trail, inviting me forward. I was about to happily turn that way and enjoy a picturesque hike with my friends, but they said, "Oh Jennie, we're actually going *this* way!"

I turned toward the trail they pointed to. Horror met my eyes in the form of the steepest incline I'd ever seen. I couldn't see the top, just up. And then *more* up. There were no trees. Nothing lush. Barely any flowers. I couldn't hear any birds—or anything else, except possibly the soundtrack to the scariest movie you've ever seen playing faintly in the background.

It was the hardest hike of my life (although it wasn't the hardest of the hikes on this mountain by a long shot). As I climbed, I felt as if I was barely making any forward progress. I may have been slower than my friends, but I made it (with the help and encouragement of one of my friends taking it slow with me). I may have had to take

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more breaks than them, but I made it. I may have slipped back a few times, but I made it.

True flourishing comes from embracing the difficulty of growth. And we can't do that in our own strength. God doesn't call us to flourish, then pat us on the back and ditch us. He doesn't say, "Okay, Jennie, good luck, have fun! Don't wither and die out there!" God calls us and then equips us. He empowers us. He strengthens us for battle. And He is with us the whole way.

We just sent off our oldest daughter to public middle school after being homeschooled her whole life. While it was so hard to let her go, to drop her off at school that first day and watch her walk into the unknown, it was comforting to know we would pick her up at the end of the day and talk about how it went. We'd continue the conversation over dinner and later in the hot tub. We aren't sending Alivia off with "Good luck! Don't make bad choices. See you next year when you go to high school!" and neglecting to equip her. We are walking with her, training her, and teaching her the very best we can.

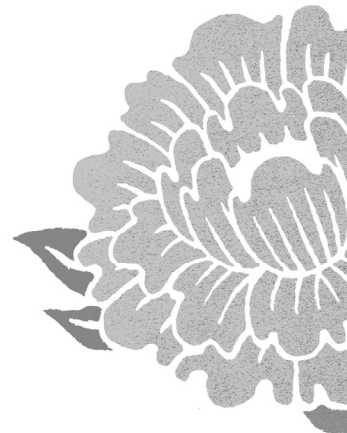
As you fight to flourish, my hope is that my words on the following pages will remind you that God is with you, teaching, training, and empowering you. The fighting you do now will lead you to the flourishing version of you God created you to be.

As I look back, I see how God was preparing my heart for the worst experience of my life. A few months before Lenya went to heaven, I was reading the book *In Search of Balance* by Richard Swenson. This line struck me: "We had better love with abandon, for what's around the corner is not ours to know."

xxvi



True flourishing
comes from
embracing
the difficulty
of growth.



Introduction

I'm so grateful that God, who is so good and loves me so much, would ready my heart for what was around the corner. He knew that 2012 would begin with celebrating the birth of our fourth child, Clover Dawn Lusko—and He knew it would end with mourning the death of our second-born daughter, Lenya Avery Lusko. God wasn't surprised by this. And He was in control all along.

I don't know what this year will bring you or what last year or the one before that did. I do know that God loves you, and that you can trust Him. Whatever fight you might be in today, know that you have the word *flourish* written all over you and your future.

I'm so grateful you have decided to join me in this journey. As we walk together, I want you to see how special you are and that where you are in life right now is special. I want you to know that it's not only possible for you to flourish in the middle of this fight but that it's necessary to have this fight in order to flourish. I'm in this with you, and I hope in sharing some of my struggles, you can see how you can keep growing.

If you find yourself asking the question “How can I flourish in this season?” I want to help you see that it's not just dirt you're planted in; it's soil with the right nutrients. It's not just crap you feel stuck in; it's the fertilizer you need. You're not buried with no way out; you're planted. You're not taking a lifetime to bloom on the outside; you're growing a strong and deep root system under the surface. You're not forgotten; you've been sown by a Gardener who fights for you.

Let's grow, girl.



The Best, the Worst, and the In Between

Fighting forward often doesn't feel like it—forward, that is. It feels more like survival. Barely getting by. Dripping in sweat, muscles aching, legs failing, but still standing, at least long enough so that your opponent doesn't take you down with a one-two punch before the bell rings.

Doesn't sound much like flourishing.

Hard times have a way of knocking us off our feet, but they also have a way of reminding us of what is most important. Before the worst day of my life, I loved God and I trusted Him. I knew that heaven was real and near, and I knew God had a purpose for me. But in the year Lenya died, God had been teaching me so much, not only about Him but about myself. In fact, I remember so clearly feeling like I was learning more in that year than I had in my whole life. It was a season of growth. I had four daughters, six years old and under. I was being stretched and strengthened in my heart, in my family, in our church. I had no idea that God had even more for me as 2012 drew to a close, no idea that I would feel His presence more than ever, even in darkness.

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Reliving Lenya's life and last days on earth in order to share this story with you has been one of the hardest things I have ever done. Flipping through journal entries splashed with tears; replaying scenes of our daughter dancing, reciting Bible verses, and playing with her sisters; remembering what she looked like when her body had surrendered its last breath—these things gutted me. But they also gave me the chance to connect some dots. Some of the most random moments in this story have been the most important. They're reminders that God is in control behind the scenes, reminders that He was, is, and will always be with me.

Words of Life

It was Thursday morning, six days before Christmas 2012. Fresh coffee brewed as eggs sizzled in the frying pan. Daisy looked at a book as if she were reading, although she was only two and she couldn't read (or could she?). Clover giggled in her high chair, observing everything like a tiny queen on her throne. As Alivia dressed for the day, I heard a cadence of footsteps coming down the stairs that could only be Lenya's. Her feet landed a bit harder and louder than the others. It was morning as usual in the Lusko household.

I scrambled eggs as Lenya settled at the table, her thick, messy hair tumbling over her head as she scribbled a birthday note for a friend's party in a few hours. I looked at her outfit and smiled. She wore one of Alivia's sparkly shirts paired with denim bell-bottoms a size too big for her with her favorite skirt over them, and hand-me-down boots from a friend. Around her neck hung one of my necklaces adorned with plastic beads in the shape of birds. It was a wild outfit—Lenya style to the max.

The week was full of dinners, meetings, staff events, and birthday parties. I was exhausted, and I reminded myself that although things might be crazy now, Friday Family Day was coming. And it was going to be the best.

Friday is Levi's and my day off. We unplug from everything to spend time as a family with as few distractions as possible. We had plans to swish and stumble our way around a rink with ice skates strapped to our feet. Levi would take Lenya to shop for presents for her sisters, and afterward we would all dress up and enjoy a fancy dinner out.

But first we had to make it through Thursday. After the kids finished their eggs and oatmeal and I plucked an unknown object off Clover's face and wiped up a sticky substance on the counter, we scrambled out the door to the eventful day ahead.

"Wait!" Lenya shouted, almost falling forward as she stopped in the doorway. "I have to write a Christmas card to Aunt Aimee!" Another delay, but I knew how important this was for her. I gave her the time to write the note, and we left it on the table to mail later. Lenya was thoughtful like that. In her five-year-old mind and tender heart, she knew the power of words, that they could bring a smile to someone's face, brighten a dull mood, or turn tears into laughter.

I love words. I don't have a widely extensive vocabulary myself, and I usually stumble to find the words I'm looking for in conversation, but I am fascinated by them, what they mean, and where they originate from. God loves words so much that He filled a book with them. Not only that, but He gave us the Word of all words, as it says in John 1:1-5:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All

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things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

Jesus is the Word, and He changes everything. God's words in the Bible can transform our hearts and our lives. In the same way, the words people speak over us can give us the strength we need in the fight.

A little over a week earlier, Levi and I had strolled through the congested sidewalks of New York City. With my arm linked through his, we drank in the holiday window displays on Fifth Avenue and shopped for a few extra Christmas gifts for the girls. I even bought a pair of dusty-rose corduroys for myself. They weren't something I would normally wear, but I tend to shop impulsively like that.

We had talked about seeing a Broadway play that night, but instead we found ourselves at a midweek worship gathering hosted by our friends. The church met in an old theater with a large stage and ornate ceiling and walls. It was dark, yet inviting. I felt the beat and the bass in the music deep in my chest.

The room filled with expectation and anticipation as a pastor I didn't know started encouraging specific people in the room. I don't know about you, but I had never experienced anything like this growing up. I had heard of churches where the pastor takes a moment to listen to what God might be speaking to specific people in a packed room. I imagined it could get a little awkward; people are sitting there, not knowing if they should stick around or use a restroom break as an excuse to run away. But there was nothing awkward about what happened to me.

As the pastor spoke inspiring and challenging words to different

people in the room, I rummaged around my giant mom bag. My fingers frantically pushed aside my hand sanitizer, allergy medicine, a diaper, in search of tissues for the woman next to me, who was moved to tears. *Why on earth did I bring this thing with me when my kids aren't even here?*

As I placed my purse back on the floor underneath my seat, I heard the pastor call my name.

I froze. *Wait. Did he just say my name? He must certainly mean Levi, not me. Or maybe he means another, more significant Jennie. Probably a Jennie who spells her name with a y at the end. My heart began to beat wildly. What is he going to tell me? Is he going to call me out on something in front of everyone?*

“Jen—Jennie,” he began, his voice powerful and comforting at the same time.

“It is not an accident you are here, Jennie . . . You didn't know you were going to be here. I don't think that was the big plan. I don't know; maybe it was. Jennie, you are going to walk away with a new impartation tonight. God has placed something into your heart. I don't know you from a bar of soap, but you have a new authority about you . . . God is going to challenge you to take a risk in Him, to trust Him, to believe that He is with you. He's going to back you, Jennie. His heart is toward you. His face is toward you. His hand is toward you. You mustn't ever forget that. You are blessed, Jennie, not cursed. God's hand is on you. You are here in the purpose and plan of God.”

This was so out of the ordinary. I didn't really know what to do with his message. Tears filled my eyes and fell freely down my face.

What happened in that theater that evening was a holy moment. I may have not understood it fully, but something beautiful unfolded when that man's words hit my heart. It's always amazing to be

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reminded that we are not alone, that God is with us, and that He loves us. I thought about these things as we made our way back home the next day.

The following week, thrust into the chaos of preparing for Christmas and scuttling through a calendar full to the brim with nonstop events and growing lists, I wrote about my experience in my journal:

This has been such a busy season. Nonstop. Like literally. But I'm not freaking out and it's only by God's grace. I've had to speak in front of people three times in three days, and tonight Levi and I are doing a capture together for the recap of what we learned this year. And it's really not easy for me—I get so nervous, but I've been really taking God at His word when He told me to be bold and to speak confidently because God is my backing. He only is my strength. And I've been experiencing this. It's been a week today since Pastor Robert spoke that over me, and I've had more opportunities in these last four days than in a long time. . . . I truly believe that this year has been a huge year for me. I fully believe that I have grown more in 2012 than in my whole life combined!

Life is good!

When the Best Turns into the Worst

On Thursday afternoon, I dropped the kids off at my mom's for the evening so Levi and I could have an at-home date night (a practice I highly recommend). I could wrap the kids' presents without them peeking or grabbing my scissors or chewing on the gift tags,

and my mom would get to spend time with her grandkids. Win-win. After enjoying my specialty—spaghetti with meat sauce—and quality make-out time with my husband, I buried myself in gifts and tape and ribbons and paper, while Levi watched *Home Alone*. As I finished putting the creative touch on the last gift, I remember soaking in the moment, grateful for time spent together before the start of our wildly wonderful Family Day.

On the drive to my mom's to pick up the kids, Levi sighed loudly, exhaling away the past few days. "I just feel so relaxed."

I nodded, rubbing his forearm draped over my thigh. I felt the same. Friday was here—well, almost, but basically here. Heat blasted from the vents. Outside, stars sprinkled the midnight Montana sky over a landscape of glistening snow. White. Pure. Bright. Light in the darkness.

And then, though we'd barely pulled into my mom's driveway, silence traded spaces with panic. My younger brother, David, ran out the front door, and as I met him at the edge of the walkway, he blurted, "Jennie, Lenya really wants you!" His breath was ragged. "She's not taking her asthma treatment!"

My heart plunged to the pit of my stomach. Sprinting into the kitchen, I found Lenya sitting on the table. My mom was holding her. Lenya looked at me, her face blank and drained of color.

I grabbed the nebulizer from my mom, held Lenya with one arm, and tried to get her to take her treatment. Instead, she passed out. Even today, the image of her lying limp on the kitchen counter tears me apart.

At that moment, Levi came in the house and immediately jumped into action. His hands clamped down rhythmically on Lenya's tiny chest, but there was no response. Time began to churn in slow motion, but in a blur. I remember crying desperate prayers

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toward heaven and telling Lenya that I loved her and that it was going to be okay. Because it was, right?

Lights and sirens filled the driveway as paramedics rushed in and rushed our little girl back out on a stretcher. Levi rode with her. My brother drove me in my car on the icy road a few minutes behind the ambulance.

As Levi and I waited in a small room at the hospital, crying and praying, a doctor appeared.

I wanted to believe the best, I wanted to hope for the miracle, but in my gut, I knew Lenya was gone. She had stopped breathing so long ago.

“I am so sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Lusko. Lenya is nonresponsive. There is nothing more we can do.”

It was as if I couldn't really hear the words coming from his mouth. I knew what he was saying, but I can only remember things happening in slow motion as he began to speak. His words, slowly connecting to my mind, were words of death. It was actually true: our five-year-old was gone.

We followed him to a room where Lenya lay. And here is where heaven truly met earth, where the tension between light and darkness collided in a way I had never before experienced. It felt as though someone had come up behind us and pushed us into a pit with only one way in and no way out. And at the same time, as I stepped toward our daughter's body, I couldn't help but feel that even in my darkest night I was overwhelmed by the love of the Light of the world.

It is unnatural to look at your child when her soul has left this earth. That second, my heart began a slow and steady break that would, over time, morph into a permanent dull ache. Lenya's eyes were open. Her face was cool to my touch, her features beautiful

and delicate. Levi took one of her hands, and I held the other on the opposite side of the stretcher.

“God, You give and take away. Blessed be Your name. You gave us Lenya. We don’t understand, but we give her back to You.” Levi’s words were words of surrender and praise spoken with our daughter lying lifeless before us. Words wrapped in a peace beyond what the human mind can comprehend. We felt God with us as tears streamed from our eyes and Levi reached down to close hers.

While my worst day was unfolding one terrible scene at a time, I realized an awful yet beautiful tension. Our worst day was actually Lenya’s best day. Her death, while horrible to us, led her straight to her Savior. The Bible says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). She wasn’t with us, but she was with Jesus. Lenya was in heaven, more alive now than she had ever been.

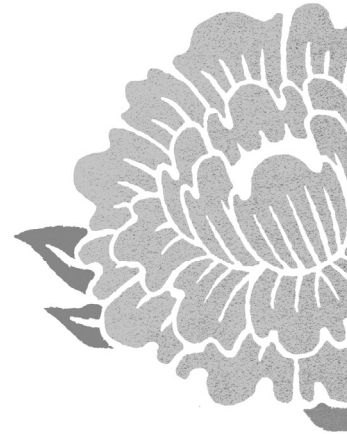
How Am I Supposed to Leave the Hospital?

In that room, my protective mama heart swarmed with questions. We had worked so hard to take care of Lenya, to make sure she was healthy and loved. Suddenly she had been snatched away from us into heaven, a place that seems so big, crowded, and overwhelming—a place so far away from our arms. I wondered who was taking care of her. Was she wandering around all by herself? Was anyone assigned to watch her? Was she lost?

My mind spun in every direction. I’ll never forget looking down and noticing my pants, the pink corduroy ones I bought in New York City. As my gaze rested on the stunning face of our daughter, the words spoken to me eight days earlier echoed softly: *You are*



I didn't have
to understand
God in order
to trust Him.



blessed, not cursed. You are in the plan and purpose of God. His hand is on you. His face is toward you. God has your back.

I knew these were scriptural truths. But I also knew that Lenya was dead and wouldn't be coming back. It's hard to reconcile the two, but deep down in my heart, I knew I didn't have to understand God in order to trust Him.

Trusting God came instinctively in that moment, but there were other fights I would still have to show up for—the first one being, how was I supposed to leave the hospital?

I honestly don't know how long we were there. I know Alivia came in at one point bringing Lenya's purse with her, and we had to tell her that her sister was in heaven. But eventually, I found myself in the front seat of our car. I don't remember how I got there, though I do remember suggesting to Levi that we invite everyone at the ER that night to church.

How did I move forward? Step by dreaded step, walking toward a new reality that I despised. Weeping. Reminding myself that the body of my daughter I left in that unnaturally bright and cold hospital room wasn't all she was. Yes, her body was there, but her soul—who she really was—was with her Savior in heaven. She was perfectly pure in His presence.

I had to make the intentional decision to walk out the front door. And I had to choose to trust God in the middle of the pain. I knew I couldn't face a single thing without Him as my guide, as my lamp lighting the road before me. I couldn't do anything in my own strength.

I wish I could tell you I've arrived and that I have a five-step program for how to leave the hospital, so to speak. I haven't, and I don't. I fight every day. It's a fight to love. A fight to grow. But I want to fight to flourish. Like the seed surrounded by darkness and dirt,

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we need these very elements to grow. It's what we need to become stronger.

In January 2013, sixteen days after Lenya went to heaven, I bought a new journal, an extra-large, plain black notebook. Unmarked, unlined pages begged to absorb new thoughts, new memories, new insight. I titled it *A New Chapter. A Terrible One. A Beautiful One.*

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16–18)

As I look ahead to this year, I have so many emotions/ thoughts/ feelings/ fears. I hate the thought of approaching this year without Lenya. I love the thought that she is in His presence in fullness of joy. I hate the thought of the possibility of forgetting memories with her / of her. I love that I got five wonderful years with her. I hate those demonic thoughts of regret and how I should've been a better mommy to her. I love that talk of heaven was always on our lips—that we talked about Jesus + His Word + prayed always. I love that we had a full five years with her. I hate that she's not here anymore. I love Lenya. I hate that our lives are forever changed. I love that we have three beautiful daughters to teach and to train and to love. I hate this aching in my soul. At the same time, I love it because I've never experienced God like this before → His grace → His love → His peace. I'm floored. This light affliction is for

a moment. This year I cling to Jesus. I cling to His word. I stand on His promises. I choose to do right. I choose to worship and obey.

When we're shoved into a storm, it can be easy to flounder. What growth is even possible when we're doing everything we can just to keep our heads above water? But it is possible to see God's goodness in the struggle, His love over the valley of death, His grace through the pain. I hold tight to the hope of heaven, yet I also grieve. I hurt. I love. I cry. I remember. I feel stuck. I move forward. It's in this tension that we can grow, if we keep trusting God and believing He is with us and has more for us.

Sunshine at the Grave

Years later, I stand in a cemetery on a cloudy day. Headstones stretch as far as the eye can see. I don't come here very often; I know Lenya's not here. But when I do stand at her grave, I am reminded of eternity. On her headstone, we chose to write 2 Timothy 1:10: "Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (NIV).

The air freezes my face. I can barely feel the falling tears. I'm reminded that the body of the little girl I carried in my womb, birthed in a room with a view of Glacier National Park, nurtured through medical struggles, and snuggled tight, lies underneath the cold ground. My heart aches in the deepest parts, a pain too great to carry.

I have to remind myself I'm not alone. I don't have to carry this heavy weight by myself. I wasn't meant to. Psalm 68:19 says, "Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens"



I don't have
to pull myself
together to
run to Him.



(NIV). God is with me. And He doesn't only carry the things that weigh me down; He also carries me.

I worship as I weep. The cloudy day depicts the state of my heart: gray. I'm so thankful I don't need sunshine in my heart in order to worship Jesus. I don't have to pull myself together to run to Him. I can be who I am, right where I am, with Him.

As I ache and long for heaven, the clouds part, inviting in a ray of sunlight that seems meant just for me: a picture of God reminding me of His presence in an overcast moment.

As pastor Robert Ferguson told me that night in New York City, maybe you didn't plan to be here in this place, in this pain, in this predicament, or even on this platform, but it's not an accident. God has called you uniquely for this situation, right here, right now. Whatever you are facing as you read these words, my hope is for you to be confident that you were born for this very fight. And you were born to flourish in it.





2

Born to Shine

When we're in the middle of the struggle, it can be easy to miss the beauty in it. The pain we feel can make us blind to the growth that's happening under the surface. The frustration with the fight can keep us preoccupied with the tiny sprouts of growth that aren't even visible to the naked eye. Pain can paralyze our vision and shame can stunt our growth. But there's actually something beautiful hidden beneath the dirt. There is a courage concealed, a strength simmering, and a wisdom waiting to be seen.

After Lenya went to heaven, there were tiny little glimpses of beauty that I would see every now and then as the waves of grief tumbled over and around me. Like the people who emerged from the woodwork of our lives, who showed up and stuck around to support us and be strong for us. Or like the deeper heavenly perspective that instinctively struck us, locked into place, and overwhelmed us in the best way.

I think of how we were designed to appreciate beauty. We're drawn to works of art painted with intentionality and thought. We take in the intricate, creative designs of the storefront display of

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our favorite shops. We observe with wonder a mural on the side of a building and consider the artist's inspiration. We see a landscape of mountains and trees, or ocean and sand, and stare in amazement.

God made us beautiful and to be drawn to the beautiful. We were created not only to look for beauty but to live beautifully, to seek inspiration, and to live an inspiring life even when we don't feel like it.

The Bible begins with this:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.
(Genesis 1:1–5 NIV)

In the beginning God created. The Hebrew word for "create" in this passage is *bara*, which means "to shape, fashion (always with God as subject)." God is the OG fashion designer. He is the master of seeing the possibilities of a blank canvas. He is the ultimate scientist who can create something beautiful from absolutely nothing. And from this verse, it seems His specialty is creating light out of darkness.

Designed for Good

It was when I was a little girl that I first heard I was designed by God and created for good. I had the privilege of growing up in a church

that taught the Bible and in a family that loved and followed Jesus. When I was seven years old, my dad prayed with me, and I made the decision to trust in Jesus and give Him my heart. As I entered middle school, I learned that I was special and worth waiting for. My youth pastor and his wife always encouraged me and reminded me that God had special plans for me, to give me a good future and a secure hope. So early on I understood that God loved me and created me for a purpose.

Whether or not you had someone speak these things over you, the truth is that God designed humans in a unique way. He designed *you* in a unique way. He fashioned us from the dust of the earth. At first glance, that may not seem super special. We're made from dirt? My husband recently preached a message about this very thing. Levi said, "God looked at the dirt and didn't just see dirt. He saw a home for His breath." A sophisticatedly designed human being made from dust? Now that's thinking creatively.

After creating the first human, God said that it was not good for him to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Everything God had made up until this point was good. But then, suddenly, it wasn't. The Hebrew word for "good" here is *tob*, which means "pleasant, agreeable, delightful." But man being alone was a problem—the first problem ever. The state of man on his own was not good. Nor was it pleasant. Or agreeable. Or delightful.

So God's creative solution was fashion. He *fashioned* a woman and brought her to the man. God gave women the unique role of making a not-good situation good. What a special calling that applies to each of us!

Proverbs 18:22 says, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD." A good thing. We were designed to bring good and to unlock favor in the lives of people around us. For

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those of us who are married, that includes our husbands, but whether you're a wife or not, God's highest potential is for you to be a good thing. You were created to make your surroundings, your situation, someone in your life better. You have a great superpower—to bring good. Whether or not you feel as though you're actively bringing good into the world, this is what God designed you for. If this is a struggle for you, as it is for me, then I want to encourage you that it's not too late to ask God to help you grow to be the good thing He created you to be.

You're meant to shine. The word *shine* means “to give forth or glow with light; shed or cast light; to be bright with reflected light; glisten, sparkle.” I want the words *glisten* and *sparkle* to describe me! This reminds me of an incredible woman in the Bible named Esther.

In the Spotlight

Esther was a Jew who lived in Persia. Orphaned at a young age, she was raised by her cousin Mordecai. At the time, the king of Persia had made some bad decisions, had brought on some drama in his life, and in a drunken stupor, ended up kicking his wife, the queen, out of the palace and out of his life. Once he got lonely and started to regret his decision, the king's executive team arranged a beauty contest to find a new queen. Esther was one of many contestants. She was a normal girl, transformed and beautified to be presented before the king. And she won *Miss Congeniality* style—going from major makeover to wearing the crown. Esther became the queen of Persia overnight. While Esther was settling into her new role as queen, a man named Haman, who was in love with himself and

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with power, fought his way to the top as the king's right-hand man. Haman was offended by Esther's cousin and allowed that bitterness to drive him mad. He decided the only remedy for his hatred was to kill Esther's people, the Jews.

Esther is most famously known for her response when Mordecai strongly advised that she beg the king for help.

"Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Mordecai asked (Esther 4:14).

After almost backing down and resisting the call to rise up, Esther bravely responded, "I'll do it. And if I die, so be it" (Esther 4:16, my paraphrase).

This was a huge moment not only in Esther's life but in the history of the Jewish people. So much was at stake. This young woman literally put her life on the line to save her nation—a shine-bright-in-the-dark moment if there ever was one. But I don't think this was the only time Esther shined. I like to think that Esther's life was full of those moments.

When she grieved the loss of her mother and father, she was born for that.

When she was chosen as a contestant in the beauty pageant for the role of queen, she was born for that.

When she became the favorite of the attendants and given special treatment, she was born for that.

When she won the pageant and became queen, she was born for that.

Each time Esther fought to flourish out of the spotlight, she moved closer to her moment in the spotlight. She may have been born to save the nation of Israel, but there were many steps in getting there, and she had to walk through that journey. And this makes me ask this question: What is so important about the spotlight?

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Why do we put so much emphasis on what is seen by everyone? I think maybe the more important question is, whose spotlight are we most concerned about, God's or everyone else's? When we are happy to be in God's spotlight, it won't matter to us if we make it big anywhere else. Whether we have thirty followers on Instagram or thirty thousand, whether our song becomes a hit, or we get the main role, how we live our life in God's spotlight is most important. God creates us for a purpose and gives us the potential to let His light shine through us in any situation.

Esther could have chosen to remain neutral. Standing up for her people was inconvenient. Her husband, the king, didn't know she was Jewish, and to approach him without being invited was risking a death sentence. (I know, weird marriage, but that's how they rolled in those days.) Esther had to decide for herself how she would allow God to use her in this situation. He had given her this platform and this privilege for a purpose. Ultimately, Esther acted on it and saved the nation of Israel from being massacred.

I love how Esther's given name, Hadassah, means "myrtle," which is an evergreen shrub and herb. The myrtle makes a great houseplant and can be sheared or pruned frequently, which makes it a prime candidate for hedges. You could say the myrtle shrub could be used for protection, to act like a barrier or a gate. But it also blooms small, fragrant, white flowers and has a pleasant aroma when crushed. Esther proved her name when she gave her life to protect her people, and when a lovely fragrance was spread as a result of the difficulty she faced. But her Persian name, Esther, means "star." God loves to take an average, ordinary plant and give it the beautiful potential to shine bright like a star. It's what He does. It's who He is.

Glow in the Dark

On the worst day of my life, it felt as if parts of me broke apart. I felt as though I had been punched in the stomach, the jaw, the head, and the thighs, and that the disorienting pain and blurred vision from these blows would last forever. I was weaker than I'd ever been before.

In all of this, God's face was toward me. He saw me. His hand was on me. He was near, and I knew this not only because the Bible says that God is near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18), but because I felt His nearness.

February 14, 2013

8 weeks, 56 days since Lenya died

What's in my heart today:

My heart is broken on this Valentine's Day. And I know God is near to the brokenhearted. So I know and believe God is near and I know and believe Lenya is with Him in His presence, so I even believe she's near because God is here. BUT because she's not her in body—she just seems so far. And my heart is aching. And Lord, You are the only One who can comfort me, so this morning I look to You and Your Word. Like Levi says, You are big enough to handle my fears and my doubts and my questions, so I come to You this morning. What I'm really struggling with is my parenting with Lenya. When it comes down to it, I was the harshest and the strictest with her. I was impatient and I feel like I didn't take care of her as I should've. I should've been at her five-year checkup with Levi. I should have made sure she had what she needed. I should have loved her better. I was learning

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to parent her better. I was learning to speak her love language. I was learning how to teach her and how to handle her freak-out moments. I just want the chance to be even better. But I won't ever get the chance with her. Ever. I get the chance with Alivia, Daisy, and Clover. I'm struggling with Your love for me, Lord! I believe that Your love is perfect and unconditional, not based on what I do or don't do, but I think I'm having a hard time resting in that love. And not thinking I should've, could've, would've.

God had given Lenya to us, but she wasn't really ours to begin with. She belonged to Him. He just chose to give her to us on loan, to love and to teach, not to mention to learn from. And for a reason I won't fully understand until heaven, He chose to take her back. Not that God wanted it, but He allowed it.

When we look to the One who created us and breathed His breath in us, we shine. Psalm 34:5 says, "They looked to Him and were radiant, and their faces were not ashamed." We can shine in the darkness because we look to God—our Creator and our King, our Lord and our Father. If He is the sun, then we're the moon. We aren't the source of light; we get to reflect it. We flourish when we reflect Jesus.

Everything we do in the current season is preparing us for the next one. Levi and I call this *training for the trial we're not yet in*. Fighting to grow sets us up to glow in the dark, so each step is essential to the next. The flourishing life is all about being faithful with the small things and watching God handle the impossible.

It's interesting to me that plants don't only need sunlight to grow; they need darkness just as much. Some plants, like gardenias and chrysanthemums, actually need up to eighteen hours of darkness each day before they bloom. In the same way, humans need both light and darkness to flourish too.

Since Lenya went to heaven, I've experienced a piercing in my soul that has lurched me into feeling like I was so lost. I have felt like a tiny seed left in the dirt, in the crap, without any hope of feeling the warmth of the sun again. But when I can look at the dirt and the dark and see it not for what it feels like it is, but as the very ingredients that are shaping me into the person God has created me to be, that's when I experience warmth. That's where I see God is with me. That's where I cling to Him, no matter how I feel, and I see Him change my perspective, and see that I was born for this. I can shine in the middle of darkness, not because of who I am or what I do, but because of Whose I am and what He's done.

Jesus is the Light of the world, and because He is in me, I can shine so others can see Him. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14–16).

Often, shining bright means letting God use our pain and heartache. If you've ever lit a glow stick, you know you have to crack it to induce the chemical reaction in the tube that makes it light up. If you want God to use you, know that it will most likely involve pain.

I know this statement has some tension to it. It's not easy to read or hear. God wants to use me? I'm totally up for that. It's most likely going to involve pain? Thank you, but no thank you and next, please. But isn't this exactly what Jesus said? "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33 NIV). That's not very encouraging or positive. It's pretty overbearing and harsh—and it's the truth.

But we don't stop with the trouble part. Jesus said next, "But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." He doesn't say "Be of

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good cheer, your pain will end soon.” Or “Be of good cheer, this ache will go away forever.” Jesus was saying, “Cheer up! I’m here. I know exactly what’s going on, and I have overcome this.”

If we let God use what He has allowed to happen, He shines through us. When we stop pushing against or refusing to fight through the pain, we open up to His will and His way—a key step toward the flourishing life.

In the Fire, but Not Burned Up

Jewelers purposefully display diamonds on black velvet. The brilliance of these gems is magnified when they’re laid against the dark backdrop. In the same way, beauty is unlocked when we’re surrounded by darkness.

God gave a promise through an ancient prophet:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by your name;
You are Mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.
When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned.”
(Isaiah 43:1-2)

When we go through fire and allow God to use our pain, He won’t let it burn us. We’ll have scars, but He will heal the wounds. The scars will remind us of God’s faithfulness and that He will use the pain for something brilliant.

In the third chapter of the book of Daniel, we read about three