



Praise for *WHEN STRIVINGS CEASE*

“In Ruth’s personal and generous way, she has crafted the message that busy and driven Christians need to hear: no amount of self-improvement or the world’s approval could ever replace our need for God’s amazing grace. This is a book for us all.”

—LYSA TERKEURST, #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING
AUTHOR AND PRESIDENT OF PROVERBS 31 MINISTRIES

“In *When Strivings Cease*, Ruth Chou Simons paints beautiful pictures with words—pictures of shame and inadequacy that we see ourselves in, and a picture of the rest we long to find ourselves in. Ruth’s humor, vulnerability, scriptural insight, and friendly offer of gospel grace come through on every page.”

—NANCY GUTHRIE, AUTHOR AND BIBLE TEACHER



“If you are a recovering people pleaser, if you’re tired of striving and measuring up, *When Strivings Cease* will be like water to your soul.”

—JENNIE ALLEN, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *GET OUT
OF YOUR HEAD* AND FOUNDER AND VISIONARY OF IF:GATHERING

“Masterfully written with honest prose, compelling story-telling, and clear Bible teaching, Ruth communicates the message of the gospel as she invites us to leave behind the false hope of self-improvement and walk in the fullness of God’s grace through Christ.”

—GRETCHEN SAFFLES, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE WELL-
WATERED WOMAN* AND FOUNDER OF WELL-WATERED WOMEN

“Ruth invites us into an understanding of how grace shapes the Christ-follower through both surrender and growth. These are not theological abstractions for her, but hard-won truths born from her own tenderly told story.”

—JEN WILKIN, AUTHOR AND BIBLE TEACHER

“Ruth Chou Simons firmly but gently redirects us back to Scripture as the primary source on what it means to trust the lifesaving, life-changing grace of Jesus. This book will resonate with any Christian who has ever wondered if they measure up to the gospel they profess to believe.”

—AMANDA BIBLE WILLIAMS AND RAEHEL MYERS, COFOUNDERS OF
SHE READS TRUTH AND EDITORS OF THE *SHE READS TRUTH BIBLE*

“I’ve had the great honor of being in Ruth’s physical presence—her faith, her trust, and her reliance on the goodness of God literally makes you feel differently than you did before you encountered her. She is a woman who knows the depths of grace and freedom. You will love this book. It will change your life.”

—JESS CONNOLLY, AUTHOR OF *YOU ARE THE GIRL FOR
THE JOB* AND *BREAKING FREE FROM BODY SHAME*

“Written with compassion, honesty, humility, and biblical wisdom, it’s clear Ruth understands the demands women experience, as well as the pressure we put on ourselves. This book is a needed (and welcome) word of refreshment, reminding us of who God is and what he has already accomplished for us in Christ.”

—MELISSA KRUGER, AUTHOR AND DIRECTOR OF WOMEN’S
INITIATIVES FOR THE GOSPEL COALITION

“I can’t think of a more timely word than the timeless truth that Jesus, alone, is enough—for our inadequacies, insecurities, hopes, and dreams. I love how my sister, Ruth Chou Simons, helps us trade our striving for security in God’s grace in these pages. If you are weary and unable to simply try harder anymore, this book is for you.”

—LISA WHITTLE, BIBLE TEACHER, PODCAST HOST, AND
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *JESUS OVER EVERYTHING*

“There are only a few people in this world where their words immediately flood my heart and mind with peace and truth and grace all at the same time. Ruth is one of those people for my wife and me! This book is a must-read for anyone dealing with the temptations of a frantic and busy and difficult world—also known as all of us!”

—JEFFERSON BETHKE, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“In a world of self-improvement and self-help, Ruth Simons delivers the message we all need to hear: We’re saved by grace, and we grow by grace. With relatability, raw honesty, and kindness, Ruth provides a clear call to women, pointing them to their only true hope in the saving work of Jesus Christ.”

—EMILY JENSEN AND LAURA WIFLER,
COFOUNDERS OF RISEN MOTHERHOOD

“*When Strivings Cease* is a breath of fresh air. Ruth is not only a wonderful storyteller, but she is remarkably open about her own journey and struggle with performing for God. I could relate to her experience on so many levels and appreciate the focus on God’s grace and sufficiency.”

—SEAN MCDOWELL, PHD, BIOLA UNIVERSITY
PROFESSOR, SPEAKER, YOUTUBER, AND AUTHOR

“As someone who easily reverts to earning my way in the world, *When Strivings Cease* turned my eyes back to the heart of the gospel. The way has been earned; we just have to accept it. Ruth’s willingness to offer up her life story to illustrate the power of trusting God’s grace blesses all who read her words with an open heart.”

—PHYLICIA MASONHEIMER, AUTHOR AND FOUNDER
OF EVERY WOMAN A THEOLOGIAN

“In *When Strivings Cease*, Ruth has revealed ‘the gospel of self-improvement’ for what it truly is—a works-based gospel which, of course, is no gospel at all. What’s the alternative? Moving from a knowledge of God’s grace to an experience of it. That’s what Ruth helps you do in this excellent book.”

—JORDAN RAYNOR, NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *CALLED TO CREATE* AND *MASTER OF ONE*

“As I turned the pages of *When Strivings Cease*, the word *freedom* repeated in my head like a mantra—Ruth is marching us toward freedom in Christ. Through biblical teaching and vulnerability, Ruth helps us understand grace and the real Jesus we all long to know. I’ll be returning to this book for years to come, and so will you.”

—TRILLIA NEWBELL, AUTHOR OF *GOD’S VERY GOOD IDEA*, *SACRED ENDURANCE*, AND *IF GOD IS FOR US*

“Ruth is a trusted author, friend, and artist who uses her gifts to display the truth of God’s favor and grace in our lives. She models a beautiful tension of stewardship and surrender. This is a must-read!”

—REBEKAH LYONS, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
RHYTHMS OF RENEWAL AND YOU ARE FREE

“In a world that screams do more, run faster, build more, get more attractive, find more followers, be more successful, Ruth is gently reminding us that we are already enough because of Jesus. You will be encouraged and changed when you close the last page.”

—JAMIE IVEY, BESTSELLING AUTHOR AND HOST OF
THE HAPPY HOUR WITH JAMIE IVEY PODCAST

“A timeless, relatable, and vulnerable read about trading the myth of the American dream for freedom found in the kingdom of Heaven.”

—MYQUILLYN SMITH, *NEW YORK TIMES*
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *WELCOME HOME*

“As vulnerable as it is funny as it is beautiful. Ruth’s story brings the timeless truth of Scripture to our social media moment of striving, “You can stop performing. God’s grace really is enough.”

—JUSTIN WHITMEL EARLEY, LAWYER AND AUTHOR OF *THE COMMON RULE* AND *HABITS OF THE HOUSEHOLD*

“A blending of her story as an Asian American woman growing up in two worlds along with generous amounts of scripture, Ruth pulls hard-won lessons from her life to redirect our understanding of where we find rest, peace, and intimacy with God.”

—VIVIAN MABUNI, SPEAKER, PODCAST HOST, FOUNDER OF *SOMEDAY IS HERE*, AND AUTHOR OF *OPEN HANDS, WILLING HEART*

“With clarity and her signature theological depth, Ruth gives us permission to exchange self-reliance for God-reliance. Her eloquent prose and humble spirit shine in this book that will transform the way you see God’s grace for you.”

—TIMOTHY D. WILLARD, PHD, C. S. LEWIS SCHOLAR,
AND AUTHOR OF *WHERE BEAUTY BEGINS*



WHEN STRIVINGS CEASE

REPLACING THE GOSPEL OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT WITH
THE GOSPEL OF LIFE-TRANSFORMING GRACE

RUTH CHOU SIMONS



NELSON
BOOKS

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When Strivings Cease

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*To the GraceLaced community, past and present:
These hard-won truths have shaped every word I write and
every stroke I paint. I can't wait for Grace to amaze you too.*



Buddha's Final Words: Strive unceasingly.
Jesus' Final Words: It is finished.
—TIM KELLER

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Introduction



We're Missing Something (Why We're So Tired. Why We Strive.)

All this trying leads up to the vital moment at which you turn to God and say, "You must do this. I can't."

—C. S. LEWIS, *MERE CHRISTIANITY*

 wish we were sitting down over a cup of coffee, face-to-face, close enough for you to see my chipped nail polish and ungroomed eyebrows (yes, I'm writing you from the middle of 2020's COVID-19 outbreak), or the way I mess with my cuticles when I'm really focused and forming my thoughts—close enough for me to ask you an honest question that's changed everything in my adult life:

If we believe Jesus is all we need, then why do we live our days

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worn out, fearful, and anxiously striving as if we are lacking and unable to measure up?

- *As if we are lacking*—lacking resources, time, achievement, clarity, purpose, energy, confidence . . . or acceptance and welcome from a holy God.
- *As if we are unable to measure up*—as friends, at work, as mothers, as wives, for our parents, with our appearance, in our current season of life . . . as Christ followers.

I don't know about you, but 2020's unexpected worldwide pandemic revealed some things in my life I conveniently overlook sometimes when everything is "normal." After the initial novelty of staying home, playing board games, and baking with family wore off, the pressure to perform set in. Suddenly, I felt the intense pressure to *carpe diem* my way through the unfamiliar circumstances, to use this extra time at home to the fullest. I don't know where I thought the expectations were coming from, but I heard them play out in my head: *Learn a language! Create a YouTube channel with helpful content! Set up the most inspiring homeschool environment! Inspire your community and employees! Lead! Set the example! Reorganize your life! Finish home projects!*

I expected maximum productivity and creativity from myself, all while navigating loss, isolation, sadness, stress eating, and perpetual low-grade fear and worry.

Was it just me? Did you notice how easy it was to default to striving our way to assurance and comfort when we felt so much fear and lack of control? Did you notice how shaky we felt about our place in the world when the expectations for social and professional engagement, and productivity, all changed in a moment?



If we believe
Jesus is all
we need, then why
do we live our days
worn out, fearful, and
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as if we are
lacking ^{and} unable
to measure up?



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The dependencies, routines, and dare I say, idols that were uncovered in my life during this chaotic start to a new decade helped me see how not circumstantial some of my responses were—and that how we seek to fix ourselves reveals what we really believe we need. This plays out even in the books we read and who we listen to for counsel.

An unprecedented number of Christian self-help books populate the current bestsellers lists, and if we were to judge our generation by the covers that line our shelves, we'd gather that, while women have unhindered opportunities for self-made success, empowerment, and freedom to break molds in this generation, we are also more anxious, overwhelmed, and weighed down than ever.

For some of us, these feelings can seem like the soundtrack playing in the background of our daily lives, and sometimes we sing along, asking those anxious questions: What does it take to not miss my purpose? To not miss my potential? To meet expectations? To not waste my life? What does it take to feel like I've done enough? What must I do to *be* enough?

I may not admit it out loud, but so often I'm looking for a formula that ensures my "arrival." I want the fix for the fear of not getting it right. I want to know what I can do to make sure I hit the mark. Is it just me? I don't think so.

The reason our bookshelves look the way they do is that we are all constantly hoping to find our purposes, discover our places in the world, and make peace with what we ourselves, and others, expect of us. These aren't necessarily bad goals—some might even call them good—but why are they leading to so much weariness and uncertainty when the formulas promise the exact opposite?

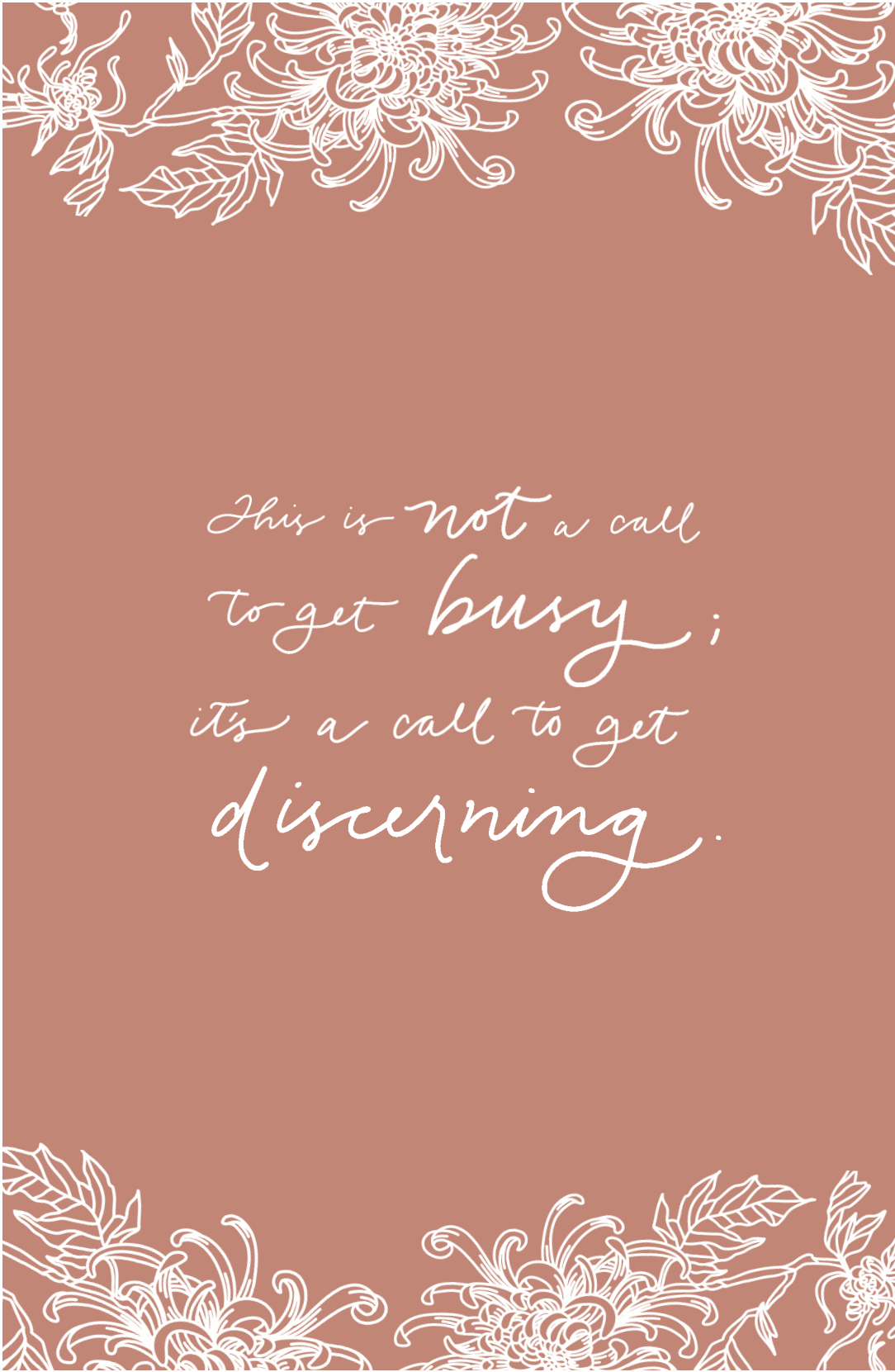
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If someone offers you a prescription for what ails you, but the prescription leaves your condition unchanged, it usually means that something is not quite right about either the prescription or the diagnosis. If what we really need in order to stop feeling so worn out and pressed to perform at a certain standard is a better strategy, then why are the prescriptions not working? We continue reaching for formulas for success, strategies for life direction, or feel-good pep talks that we think must certainly be the fix for our feelings of inadequacy. And I get it. I mean, I'd love to be writing a book of life lessons you could emulate and run with, stories that immediately empower you to *do something*. Because that's what feels right in this culture of hustle. But here's the thing: God has given us a better way, one that, at first, makes you scratch your head and think, *What? How does that make sense?*

And maybe this is why I wish we were on a coffee date. Because then you'd see how seriously I mean it when I say: what actually changed everything for me in this unending search for adequacy, enoughness, whatever you want to call it, was truly understanding God's grace—by which I mean, reclaiming it from its trite usage and looking at it from a biblical point of view—and I almost missed it. It almost seemed too simple, or like there should be more to it, but this is what I've learned takes us from a place of striving to living fully into our spiritual potential as image bearers of a bigger-than-we-think God. I've learned that what I needed was more than the latest prescription; I needed a proper diagnosis and a true solution for my endless striving.

That's the journey I want us to undertake together here. This is not a call to get busy; it's a call to get *discerning*.

Because what we've been busy doing isn't working. We've



*This is not a call
to get busy ;
it's a call to get
discerning .*



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gotten out of sync with the foundations of what we believe and why our beliefs about God matter in our everyday lives. My goal is to help you realign with what it really means to trust in the grace of God. And to stop thinking of your relationship with Jesus as something adequate to save you from eternal despair but not enough to secure your identity here and now.

At least that's what my actions say I believe when I trust in Jesus for salvation but trust in myself (think: control and manipulate my circumstances) to navigate life. The weariest, most powerless times of my life have been made so not because there wasn't enough content filled with strategies available for the Christian life, but rather because not enough of that material grounded me in what is actually *life-changing* and not just self-bettering.

Could it be that we are so worn and desperate for ways to better ourselves because we've missed the power, inherent in the grace of God, that eradicates self-improvement altogether?

Is it possible that we keep trying to answer the wrong question—"Am I enough?"—when we're really wanting to know: "Is God enough?"

The answer to the latter will satisfy the first.



In *What's Wrong with the World*, G. K. Chesterton wrote, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."¹ His thought is comforting for me as I think about all the ways I can feel discouraged in my relationship with God and want to give up. Do you feel confused at times with God's job versus your job in the Christian life? It

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could be because the truth of God's grace, when you really think about it, is outrageous. So we downplay it, sometimes subconsciously, and tend to want to lean back on ourselves. We look at the outlandish claim of the gospel that Jesus accomplishes everything we can't and deem it as less than sufficient for change and transformation in believers. We think we must need to add something more to it. After all, it makes sense for us to also have to pull some weight, right?

We might not say we believe a Jesus-plus-our-efforts idea of the gospel, but when we place our performances on the pedestal of personal progress, we're not relying on the grace of God. We're worshipping the gospel of self-reliance. Self-reliance is something we can control, manipulate, and measure according to our efforts. Grace, on the other hand, is countercultural with its rejection of self-sufficiency and its relinquishing of power. Whether we recognize it or not, our culture is sadly intoxicated with the lure of all that's measurable and based on self-reliance, even for those who claim to represent the gospel of Christ. We say we trust that Jesus is enough, but we spend our lives trying to prove that *we are*, instead.

Finding the gospel old news and antiquated, we end up substituting self-help and formulas for our true means for change—the grace of God.

What wears you out today? Is it the impossible standards? The comparison? The baggage of trying your best and your best not being “good enough?”

I see you, friend—trying to read your Bible and keep a quiet time.

I see you, mama—working to keep up with the latest strategies in parenting so your kids will “turn out right.”

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I see you, college grad—goal setting and life strategizing, seeking ways to use your gifts and talents for fear of wasting your life.

I see you, sister—feeling behind before you’ve even started.

I see you, and I am you. I’ve been in those places more than once, and I’m here to tell you that you don’t have to keep living there. The abundant life God has promised his children is so much more than that. Shall we walk there together? This journey is for you; you can start right where you are. And I promise—this will change everything.



PART 1



When Striving Isn't Enough



ONE



Bent and Broken

Striving to Please

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

—2 CORINTHIANS 12:9

Your name comes from the word for a willow—bending easily but not easily broken,” my mother said, as she gracefully formed the Chinese character for my name, stroke by stroke, every mark placed in order. I’m an artist. I can’t help but appreciate the pictorial aspect of the Chinese language; each character tells a story.

With my name, my mother meant for me to know strength. Hidden within the feminine exterior of the name *Rou*—meaning soft, gentle, or lovely—was a root of resilience and tenacity.

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I'd need exactly those traits as I accompanied my parents from Taiwan to the United States as a child, finding my place in a new land to call home. Learning a new language, new systems, unexpected flavors and textures (hello, Kraft Singles American cheese), and different acceptable norms, values, and standards for beauty (think: tanned skin over pale porcelain) required every bit of adaptability, resilience, and tenacity my mother implied in the lexical origin of my name.

People often marvel that I learned English as quickly as I did but comment on how hard it must have been for my parents and me to adapt to life in the United States. Yes, it's amazing to think of all the ways our little family overcame the obstacles of language, transportation, education, and culture, but the greatest challenge was figuring out what it took to be accepted—and to assimilate.

What is expected of me? How do I fit in? What do other girls wear to a birthday party? Is it better to stand out or to disappear? What kind of lunch box will make people like me? (Hint: in 1980 it was Strawberry Shortcake.) As a first grader, I thought these questions were unique to my personal story of crossing the ocean, learning a new language, and finding friends in a new school, but it turns out these attempts to meet “standard” populate everyone's internal dialogue.

You don't have to be an immigrant to feel well-acquainted with this futile mission. Anyone who has ever moved to a new town, been the new student on campus, started a social media account, found a different friend group, joined a gym, or given her life to Christ understands the question that wells up inside each of us: *What must I do to be enough here?*

I've been leading GraceLaced Co. since its founding in 2013

(some of you may remember when it was solely a blog by the same name in 2007), and because I use online platforms to encourage people through both business and ministry, I'm especially cognizant of how our constant access to curated, well-defined perspectives can contribute to either healthy reorientation of our thoughts or unhealthy condemning self-awareness—the latter always telling us that we're not quite fitting in yet, that we've missed the mark and must endlessly strive to attain it.

This endless striving is what I struggled with in those early days of my youth—and still struggle with today. While being *tenacious* and *not easily broken* can be helpful when adjusting to new environments, the other side of it is sometimes a tendency toward people-pleasing, shape-shifting, and bending oneself to seek another's approval. Resilience can be Malleable and Compliant's tougher older sister. The "You go, girl" armor to our "Am I enough?" Even the dictionary gives *pliable* as a synonym for the word *resilience*. Either quality can be an asset—or a burden. *Bending easily but not easily broken* was simultaneously freeing and oppressing for me. Who doesn't want to know resilience? But somewhere along the way I detoured onto the path toward becoming, instead, someone *pleasing*. Someone others favored.

As a young woman taking cues from my left and my right, from what was spoken and unspoken, applauded and shamed, it sure felt like earning favor was more than a strong suggestion; it was a cultural expectation. While differently expressed, both the Eastern and Western worlds I was caught between considered favor and approval most valuable commodities.

Not much has changed in the world that surrounds us, decades later. Being pleasing—being someone who matters, who belongs, who is favored, liked, popular, fawned over, and

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admired—has become a global pastime, if not an obsession. As I write, over one hundred million people in the United States alone are scrambling for attention, favor, and popularity on the short-video social media platform known as TikTok. And just yesterday, I read of one popular user losing five hundred thousand followers within a matter of days because of some unfavorable behavior that made for bad PR.

Let's be honest: it's not favor in itself that TikTokers are craving; it's what favor and popularity deliver. Brand partnerships, media attention, book deals, name recognition, a sense of arriving. The ability to please others pays, and we've built our lives around its winnings.

Pleasing others to gain favor or preference has driven millions of dollars in cosmetic surgery, social media campaigns, brand management, and products we reach for every day without even thinking about it. Endlessly chasing approval and affirmation isn't the exception; it's the rule. And the same angst that drives us to secure belonging and acceptance through choosing the right words, posting the right things on social media, doing what's widely accepted, and being the most likable versions of ourselves accompanies us into our lives in Christ. Left unchallenged, this angst leaves us limping along—lacking the joy, hope, peace, assurance, and transformation we expect to experience as believers. A worldly means of favor was never meant to deliver an otherworldly means of grace.



From the conversations I have around my kitchen table to the ones I have with readers around the country, I keep hearing

similar stories from women who want to see breakthrough in their lives. They want to break the cycle of worry, fear, weariness, busyness, comparison, or joylessness. They want to feel accepted, known, loved, and enough for what God has called them to do. These are Bible-believing women in church, reading good books, participating in Bible studies, loving their families, serving their communities, and doing hard things. These are women who know what to tell a friend who's questioning her worth and her purpose. These are women who love Jesus. I'm one of these women; I'm guessing you may be too.

I meet so many of you while speaking at Christian events and conferences, and if you only knew—I wrestle with my own enoughness at these events too. I've heard it said that there are authors who speak, and then there are speakers who write books occasionally. I'm the former. Public speaking turns my insides out. For me, it's a combination of lifelong stage fright mixed with the steep learning curve of stage presence after a lifetime of local presence from my kitchen table—and *not* with lights and cameras. I love speaking after I finish the work. I love the opportunity to step out from behind a screen, a beautifully published book, an edited photo, and the packaged artwork that customers receive—and show up as myself, unfiltered, unedited, unpolished: a real middle-aged woman preaching the same truths to herself as she preaches to others. I'm so grateful to be invited and to be entrusted with the hearts of women who come to listen. But the weeks, days, and even moments leading up to my time at the podium before hundreds of thousands are fraught with doubts and convincing narratives:

I'm not funny enough.

I'm not eloquent enough.

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I'm not godly enough.

I'm not experienced enough.

I'm not punchy enough.

I'm not animated enough.

I'm not interesting enough.

I'm not knowledgeable enough.

I'm not like [name of any peer I admire] enough.

I promise—these feel ridiculous for me to say out loud (I mean, what is this—middle-aged meets middle school?), and I wouldn't even vulnerably write them out here if I didn't think that you sometimes hear these things whispered in your ear too.

Recently, after having not spoken for some time at an event due to a year of pandemic restrictions, I found myself unnecessarily gripped with fear while preparing for my session at the first major in-person event since COVID-19 cancellations. From a hotel room all alone, I felt the *not-enoughs* crowding out the message I was trying to prepare.

I knew I needed to have a chat with the Lord about what was going on in my heart and mind. I silenced my phone and turned off the music. And confessed aloud to the Lord: “God—you’ve gotta help me overcome this anxiety if you want me to do this work. You’ve gotta give me better coping skills, better speaking skills, better stage skills.”

And though I heard no audible sound in that hotel room, I did recall his words through the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

And as I remembered God's provision of grace to Paul, I was sure of his response to me:

It's not about you, child. I get to use you to make much of me if I want to, even if you don't feel the approval or favor you think you need. You don't need to be good enough. You need to be good with me being enough. How else do you think I'm going to deliver a message of grace through you?

I went to the event that night aware of my weaknesses but even more aware of God's faithfulness—before I even got onstage to deliver the closing keynote.

God desires to prove his faithfulness through our surrender in our weaknesses, but so often we choose to resist his help, clinging to our own determination to prove ourselves strong. We'd rather limp along in our striving than surrender in weakness. The reason we limp along and live worn out in our Christian lives is what I hope to uncover in these pages you hold in your hands, and it's what I seek to lead us out of through the means of grace.

In some ways, this journey has to start at the beginning of my story. I've written (and painted) my way through several books, all of which point to foundational truths about God's character, our identity in him, and how we can be rooted in truth through our everyday lives. Each of my previous books has been devotional in nature—meditations and studies that lead us to a deeper walk with the Lord. They've been some of my very favorite projects to date.

But this time, I want to tell you the backstory—the reason I care so much about foundational truths, believe that preaching truth to yourself matters, and advocate for beholding God's

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greatness in our mundane everyday. Beautiful, inspirational, and even compelling truths can only grow up into maturity when planted in good soil; otherwise, they're just pretty handpicked bouquets—delightful for a time but lacking any sustaining power. The most vibrant florals wilt and fade when not deeply rooted. This book is the hard-won, mended soil I've learned to cultivate in the last two decades of my life.

Good soil—really good soil— isn't just good because of the visible top layer of mulch that keeps it looking fresh and maintained. Good soil is known for its nutrients, substance, and moisture-keeping qualities; it's the stuff beneath the surface that really matters. Good soil seeks to hold on to every bit of thirst-quenching water it receives, and it releases nutrients to the roots established within it. Good soil is the difference between a plant that withers and a plant that grows, and, as Jesus taught, good soil is the difference between truth that transforms and truth that never takes root.

Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands



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it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. (Matt. 13:18–23)

We all live between two worlds. We are planted here on earth while our hope is in heaven. We are given work to do in temporary soil that, we're told, has the potential to spring up into unending fruit. We live in earthly bodies but abide in the eternal. In Christ, we are instantly transferred from dark to light, but we are continually being made new. Present progressive. It's ongoing and actively happening right now. Everything that is ours in Christ is true right now but, at the same time, not fully realized—yet. We are living the now and not yet. And in this in between, we can mistake *not yet* for *not enough* if we're not grounded in what the Bible actually says about God's favor and how we receive it.

We're *not yet* sinless, but his forgiveness is enough to make us clean.

We're *not yet* with him face-to-face, but his presence is enough to sustain us.

We're *not yet* fully transformed, but his glory is enough to declare us worthy.

Instead of deeply rooting ourselves within the substance of God's grace, we keep trying to fit grace into the framework of *our own* soil for success—a framework that feeds on our innate pressure to perform and seeks to sustain a standard that disappoints no one.

That's why we're so tired. That's why we keep hustling. That's why we never feel like we're enough. We're working so hard to bloom, to bend, to please that we've neglected the soil from which we flourish.

I'm convinced we live and act out of what we believe, meaning

that what we love most, believe wholeheartedly, and feel most convinced of will dictate the choices we make, the things we prioritize, the fears that consume us, and how we orient our lives.

Getting to the Root of It

I can only assume—in my own life and in yours—that when we run ragged chasing an unobtainable goal for arrival, we’re actually being chased down by an Enemy whose lies have been the same from the beginning of time: *God is not trustworthy. You have to be your own hero. You need to know more, be more, do more in order to save yourself.* . . . from whatever your worst fear is.

Our culture’s answer to “Am I enough?” is always “You are if you believe it!”

We’re fed the formula: Soothe your fear of not being enough with achievement. Indulge in the kind of self-love that makes you resilient to anything or anyone that’s unloving. Be the best. Replace your sense of lack with control. Keep things neat and tidy. Cover up your exhaustion with religious effort that’s too nice to argue with.

The Enemy knows, if we follow this formula, we’ll eventually replace the true good news of Jesus Christ—that God’s son took on flesh, lived a sinless life, and died on a brutal cross as penalty for our sin, that we might be adopted as sons and daughters of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and made alive in Christ, just as he himself resurrected and overcame death—with our own gospel of self-improvement.

I know what you’re thinking. *How can self-bettering seem more appealing than Jesus?* Deception wouldn’t be doing its job

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it if looked like a fake. We believe this false gospel because it's almost like the real thing—just a little easier and more convenient to take in. We buy into this formula every single day.

But maybe you've already felt it deep down inside: the strategy for self-improvement is not really working. The race to becoming a more acceptable version of ourselves is simply *not enough*. It has never been enough, and it never will be. I should acknowledge here that many books have been written about this—I *know* I'm not novel in treating this topic of "enoughness," but my goal is not to rehash whether we are enough. Rather, I'm seeking to peel back the layers of *why* we continue in the cycle of thinking enoughness is attainable by our own means. And how all that striving has to do with what we really think about God's grace.

We keep trying to squeeze life out of a means that never matched the end. God gives his freedom and welcome in *his* way. And, truth is, this faulty framework and insufficient understanding of approval leaves us with only one of two options: We either keep striving—bending, maneuvering, adapting—to be what we think is required of us. Or, alternatively, we give up pleasing anyone else—including God—and only seek to please ourselves. You see, friend, if we believe it's up to us to be pleasing and enough, we can only try harder or stop caring altogether. Neither is what God intended for you.

So let's take a moment to be honest with ourselves—a bit of self-diagnosis here at the start. Did you pick up this book because you're always seeking to try harder, or are you on the brink of throwing in the towel with figuring out what God really wants *from* you and *with* you? It's okay if you can't quite answer that just yet, but maybe start with a little assessment. What's your

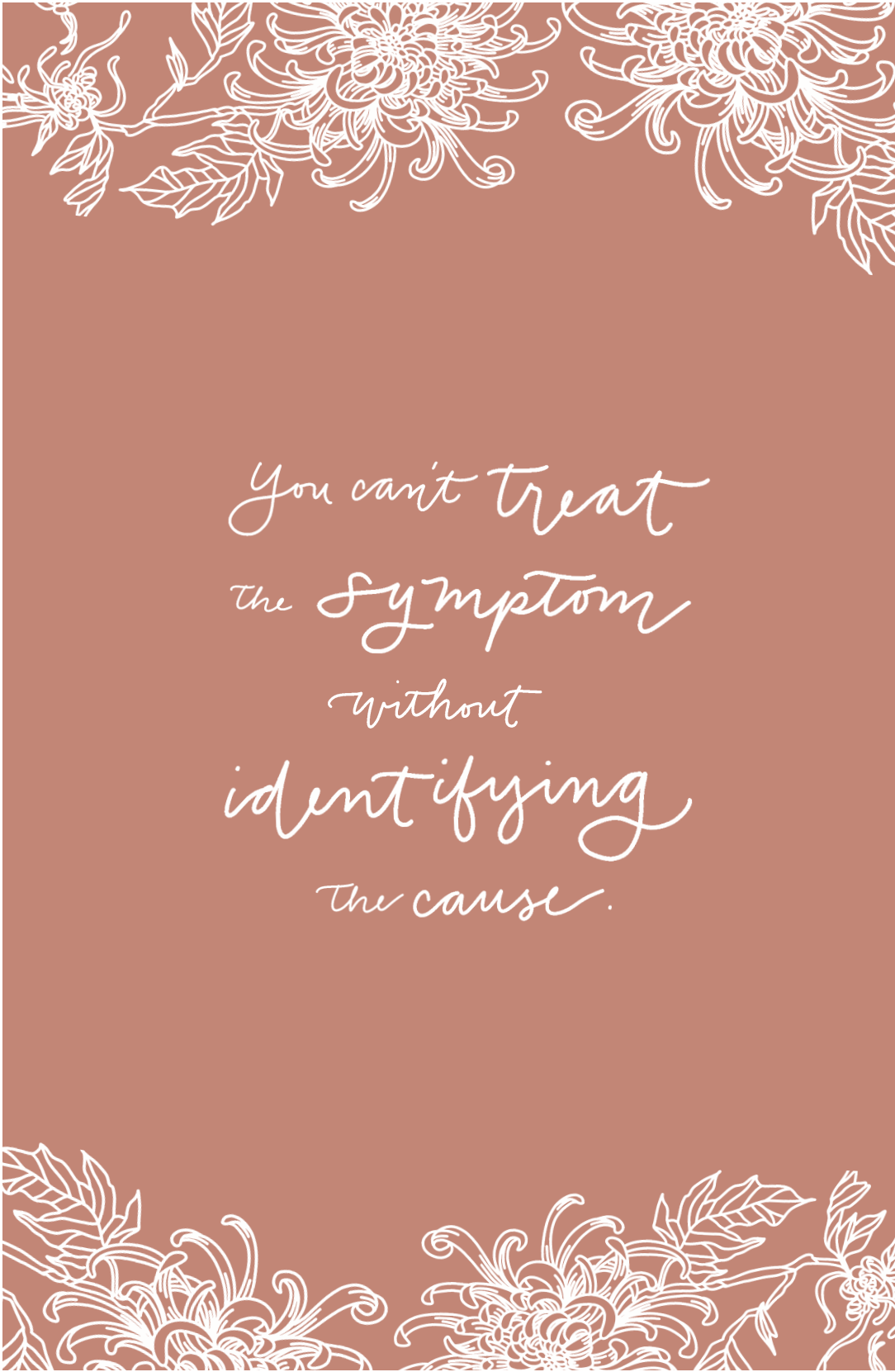
current response when you read about the Christian life in the Bible? Do you feel . . .

- grateful and relieved?
- stressed and guilty?
- tired of trying to figure it out?

You can trace your way back to your core belief by starting with your response. When you believe your only hope is God's grace, you'll respond with gratitude and relief. When you believe it's up to you to perfectly please God, you'll struggle with guilt and fear. And if you believe God is unknowable, unkind, or unfair in what he asks of his creation, you'll stop trying to know him at all. My most anxious, weary, and discouraged times are not simply seasons affected by circumstance; they are seasons shaped by wrong core beliefs about God. What do you find yourself believing in this season?

Even all the way back in the garden of Eden, Eve doubted God—her core belief was that God might be holding out on her. And so her response was reaching out and taking what she believed was lacking in God's plan and provision.

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. (Gen. 3:4–6)



*You can't treat
the symptom
without
identifying
the cause.*