

"A warm cup of hot cocoa for the weary mother's soul."
— Jennifer Fulwiler, standup comic and bestselling author

in the Trenches

FINDING GOD THROUGH PARENTING LITTLES



Kelsey Gillespy

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Finding God Through Parenting Littles

By Kelsey Gillespy



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*To every mother who has ever felt
exhausted, invisible, or alone,
especially my own mother,
who fought in the trenches
with unceasing love*

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Introduction

Hi, Friend! How Old Are You?

My kids make friends everywhere they go. It could be at the playground or in dance class or in line at the grocery store. One time they even played with friends in a public restroom. Every encounter sounds something like this:

My kid: Hi, friend!

Other kid: Hi.

My kid: How old are you?

Other kid: (Says a number)

My kid: (Gasps audibly) I know somebody who's that old! Let's play!

Then they go running off together, beaming with joy. Sometimes they end up sitting on top of the monkey bars, chatting like little birds. Other times, they land in the sandbox. Still others, they chase each other around, shrieking and laughing all the while.

Later, my kids come running to me, red-faced and thirsty, dying to tell me everything they know about their new bestie. The in-depth reports usually include how old that friend was and *maybe* their birthday. If

I'm really lucky, I get a description of how tall they were, too.

"What was their name?" I ask every single time.

They shrug. "I don't know, but can we play with them again sometime?"

This tactic seems to work like a charm (my daughter even picked up a boy's mom's phone number this way so we could have a play date), but I'm not sure if it would fly in adult relationships. So, I won't ask how old you are or invite you into a filthy sandbox. But I would like to be friends.

So, let's see how this works . . .

Hi, friend! I'm Kelsey. I'm a mom by trade, professional toddler-wrangler and bottom-wiper by practice. There's nothing exceptional about me aside from the fact that I birthed five children in nine years and lived to tell about it. I don't have a PhD (though I *do* have a Master's Degree in Sport Psychology). I don't have celebrity status (though to my kids, that might be a different story). I don't have millions of dollars or a huge, cultlike following. The most valuable thing I have is my experience as a mother, which, as it turns out, is more valuable than I originally thought.

You see, I grew up in the Midwest in a stereotypical suburban family. The only thing we were lacking was a picket fence. My mom stayed at home with my brother and me and set the standard as an extremely engaged and invested mother who constantly put her family

first. But one time, as we played a game I undoubtedly chose, she paused and looked down at me. Fatigue clouded her eyes. Her brow pinched in longing.

She sighed. "It's lonely being a mom."

At the time, I didn't know how to respond. How could she be lonely when I was always right there with her? I mean, really. I never left her side. What more could she want? To me, it seemed like being a mom was the best gig in the world. She got to play with me—the kid she surely adored more than anything else in life—every single day. No breaks, no exceptions. What could be better than that?

But still, her words stuck with me. Years passed. Then decades. Slowly, the Velcro that attached me to her wore down and I was able to pull free and finally give her some space. Not that she ever asked me to.

Soon afterward, I gave birth to my first baby and I didn't see another adult face aside from my husband's for months. From the depths of my subconscious, my mother's words floated to mind.

It's lonely being a mom.

Finally, her words made sense. For the first several months of my baby's life, my daughter and I didn't leave the house. Instead, we stayed in the living room with all the blinds closed so no one could catch a glimpse of me trying to figure out how to breastfeed. Like a psychopath, I sat on the couch, rocking back and forth, singing one song over and over because that was the only thing

that calmed the baby, and it was also all my exhausted brain could muster.

But I wasn't the only one who suffered from the new-parent level of exhaustion. Once, my husband shook me awake in the middle of the night.

"Kelsey, you have to feed the baby."

I rubbed an eye and fought through the thick fog of sleep deprivation. Still, I couldn't understand what he was saying. "What?"

"You have to feed the baby!" he said again, this time more urgently.

I absorbed his panic, the hazy cloud in my head now completely gone as my heart raced in my chest. "Where is she?"

"I just gave her to you!"

"You *what?*" The panic kicked into full gear. I didn't remember getting the baby from him. All I knew was that I didn't have a baby in my hands. Or in my lap. DID I DROP HER? *Oh God, please tell me I didn't drop my baby!* I desperately searched all around—on the floor, under the blankets, everywhere. I smoothed my hand on top of the blankets, trying to feel for her in the dark. Instead, my fingers found something soft and glossy.

I picked it up and examined it closer in the moonlight. It was a pair of my husband's athletic shorts.

"How the heck did these get in here?" I said, holding them up so my husband could see.

Even in the darkness, I could see his face flush. Somehow, through sleep and dreams and fatigue, he had walked to his dresser, pulled out a pair of shorts thinking it was the baby, and wanted me to feed them.

Sure enough, when we looked, the baby was sound asleep in her crib beside our bed.

It was a crazy moment for sure, and I can promise it wasn't the last. But now, as we look back on those moments, we laugh. Now—years later—those moments are remembered with joy because we accompanied each other in the trenches of parenthood. And man, these trenches can be pretty deep and dark. I know because I've been there, surrounded by the shadows and loneliness. I've seen my own mother swallowed by their depth, and I've witnessed and walked with other moms who've said the same thing.

It's lonely being a mom.

So often we fight alone, keeping our heads down, grinding through these days just to get them over with. Past the temper tantrums and blowout diapers. Beyond the middle-of-the-night feedings and early-morning wake-up calls.

Slowly, surely, we climb to the top of the trench, throw one arm over the ledge, then the other, and pull ourselves out. But that takes years. Years of formative growth for our children, no doubt, but also years that can be formative growth for *us* if we allow them to be.

What if we could *enjoy* these trenches? What if we could work together, hand in hand? What if by talking to other moms (or reading this book), you discovered that these trenches can be surprisingly beautiful? And, most importantly, instead of making you lose your identity and grow stale in your relationship with God, what if these years could fill you up and make your faith grow?

Well, that's why I'm writing this book. For you. To show you that you're not alone, though you may feel like it sometimes. This book is my attempt to rise from the muck, to walk through these trenches and look in the eyes of all of you who are in here with me. This book is to let you know I *see* you. I see you sacrificing sleep to feed your baby or strip pee-soaked sheets from small beds. I see you changing diapers and wearing day-old spit up. I see you getting shouted at by an angry toddler and trying your hardest not to lose your mind. I see you giving even when you feel like you have nothing left to give. And yes, I can even see (and understand) the moments of saying and doing things you regret (girl, been there).

Parenthood forces us to set ourselves aside, that's true. It calls us to immense selflessness. But that doesn't mean you must disappear or be forgotten.

This book will tell you that you are valuable.

You're not alone.

You're just in the trenches.

And I'm right here with you.

By reading this book, you are choosing community. You are choosing solidarity. You are choosing to stop grinding this whole motherhood thing out on your own, and instead, you are bravely rising to your feet to walk beside all the others who are in these trenches with you. As you continue reading, I encourage you to take your time and prayerfully reflect on the following sections. Go so far as to write those reflections in a prayer journal. In fact, why don't you grab that right now? Get a pen or pencil while you're up, too. Seriously.

I'll wait.

Back already? Awesome.

As I was saying, this book is meant to be a tool for your own personal use. It's not a race. You don't have to sprint through. It's more of a walk. A journey, really. So take your time. Use the following sections and reflections however they may be most beneficial to you. You can go from the beginning to end, one chapter a day, to become a holier and more whole mother in a month. Or, if there's a section that speaks most to you, you can spend time really digging into it. However you decide to use it, this book is designed to help you claim your own identity, grow richer in your faith, and live your vocation as a mother to its fullest.

Together, we'll find the true purpose and meaning of parenthood, examine the characteristics of God, discover who *you* really are, and figure out how the heck you can have a rich faith and sense of identity *while*

doing the mom thing. Whew. Sounds like a lot. But really, it's pretty simple. We'll walk through all of that together, one step at a time. Here's what you'll find in every chapter:

Scripture Verse: hear what God has to say about that chapter's reflection.

Real Life Stories: read stories from my own crazy life as a mother that have taught me more about God.

Snack Time!: nibble on a thought, suggestion, and/or question that will nourish and sustain you throughout the day.

Prayer: bring it all back to God through prayer.

Further reflection and group discussion questions are located in the back of this book, in case some sort of miracle occurs and you find extra time to dive deeper on your own or meet with your group of gals on the weekend. (It probably wouldn't be this weekend, of course. No mom is free on that short of a notice. But maybe in, like, thirteen weekends when a few of you can find a spare hour.) Whatever happens, deeper reflection guides are there if you need them, and you can reference them whenever you feel inclined to do so.

I am so excited to walk with you, both in the pages of this book and in the trenches of this life. Maybe someday we'll meet in person and can share more of our stories, some with laughter, some with tears. All of them,

no doubt, over a cup of something caffeinated. Whatever the case, I hope you know that you are surrounded by a community of women (including me!) who share similar hopes, dreams, and struggles. Now, as you continue to put one foot in front of the other, remember that you are covered in my prayers and the unblemished intercession of the saints, so that you may love your vocation and live it to its fullest.

PART I
What Is Parenthood?



“You’re in the Trenches”

The Exhaustion and Loneliness of Motherhood

“Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

“FOUR?” The woman’s eyes nearly popped out of her head, which was quite an understandable response.

I hadn’t showered in days, and I had barely slept during that time because that’s what happens when you’ve just had your fourth baby in six years. So, I crouched there in the dance studio lobby looking half dead, shoving my daughter’s feet into some too-small tap shoes. I only knew what day it was because that happened to be the day of the week when I took my daughters to dance class and tried to entertain all my littles.

In one small room.

For two hours.

With a huff, I rose to my feet and watched my daughter skip into the studio.

“Four,” I echoed, and silently counted each one of my kids to make sure they were all there. It wasn’t too hard. One was in class. The others were all hanging from my body.

My oldest cackled as she climbed my torso, my two-year-old clung shyly to my leg, and the newborn screamed from her car seat, which was dangling from the crook of my elbow.

We had only been there a little while and I was already on the verge of collapse.

Tightness squeezed my chest. Managing the chaos at home was hard enough. But having them all together in one crowded, public space? I took a deep breath and checked my watch. Thanks to being 10 minutes late, we only had 110 minutes to go.

The other mom finally blinked. “I bet you can’t wait for school to start again.”

“Actually,” I said, shooing my oldest off my waist, “we homeschool.”

Her jaw dropped. I didn’t blame her for it. “You homeschool?”

“That’s right.” I set the baby down, shuffled to the nearest chair with my toddler still attached to my leg, and then started to fish through my bag for my nursing cover. Instead, I found some diapers and some wipes.

An extra pair of infant clothes. A grocery bag. Snacks. All the water cups for my big kids. Somehow even a squeaky toy was in there. My heart raced inside my chest as heat surged into my cheeks. *Please tell me I packed my nursing cover.* I stuck my head inside the bag and looked around, finally finding the floral cloth at the bottom of the bag. Flinging the loop around my head, I tucked the newborn beneath the cover and took a breath.

"You must never get a break," another woman piped up.

My head jerked in her direction. The constant noise and chaos of life had made coherent thoughts difficult over the past several years. But in that moment, when my scattered thoughts and bedraggled emotions were all jumbled up and put together, I realized that they echoed her words exactly.

I never got a break.

Not in the morning when I first opened my eyes. Not all day long. Not even in the middle of the night.

Never.

I glanced back at the woman as she chucked a Cheeto in her mouth and then handed one to her daughter. She didn't have to utter another syllable. She understood. I could see it in her tired smile, in the way her bag overflowed with prepacked snacks and pint-sized clothes, in the tiny wrinkles cupping her eyes and lips—marks left behind by laughter and fatigue and worry.

We were women who were constantly watched, but rarely *seen*. Constantly criticized, and yet always overlooked.

Moms.

We were moms.

Exhausted. Overwhelmed. Full of obligations and demands.

And we never got a break.

But what exactly was I wanting a break *from*? My children? Their personalities? Motherhood in general?

I wrestled with that question as I patted my baby's back.

Would a good mother want a break from her children? *Bounce, bounce.*

Is that what I really want? *Pat, pat.*

To be away from them? *Pat, pat.*

I love them, I really do. I'm just so exhausted that—*BURP!*

A bright white stripe of smelly, partially digested milk ran down the front of my shirt, splotching the chair beneath me and puddling on the floor. The baby screamed in my face as I whipped out the wipes and started scrubbing spit up off the dance studio's furniture, commanding my big kids to stay away from the mess.

This. This was what I needed a break from.

Not motherhood, but the feeling of being alone in its grind. From being all by myself in these trenches.

Invisible. Scrapping to survive. Caked in dirt and the smell of human waste. Buried in tears and bloodcurdling screams.

"My kids were spit-uppers, too," Cheeto Mom said. "They had to take medicine it got so bad."

Her words extinguished the flames in my cheeks. Suddenly, the mess wasn't an embarrassment. It was a bridge. A connection to someone else in the trench.

And *that* was what I needed. Ironically, my baby's vomit was the key to getting the break I craved.

I tucked the spit-up soaked wipe back in my diaper bag and struck up a conversation with Cheeto Mom. As we talked, our kids began playing together on the freshly cleaned floor, and the anxiety in my chest disappeared. We chatted about motherhood, temper tantrums, and sleep deprivation. We connected about our kids' education and activities. We talked about our husbands and jobs and how we would survive another day.

Before I knew it, dance class was over, and my daughter raced over to jump into my arms. I squeezed her tight before scooping up the baby, who was now snoozing in her car seat.

Silently, I counted my kids to make sure they were all there. It wasn't too hard. They were all, in some way, hanging from my body.

"Ready?" my daughter asked in her innocent, high-pitched voice.

I nodded.

Then, step by tiny toddler step, we slowly crossed the street.

But this time, as my children clung to me, the load felt like one I could carry.

SNACK TIME!

Making connections with other moms in the trenches is essential. How can you reach out to another mom today?

PRAYER

Jesus, these trenches of motherhood feel so lonely and exhausting. I can barely rise from the floor, let alone get up and walk through these dank tunnels. Yet over and over in Scripture, that's what you tell people to do. Rise and walk. It's a product of your divine healing. Lord, heal me of my spiritual and physical fatigue. Be the remedy for my loneliness. Then reach your all-powerful hand out to me and help me rise and walk through these trenches. Help me encounter other moms who are in here with me. We all need each other, Lord, and, more than anything, we all need you. Amen.