

GLORIA FURMAN

Treasuring Christ

WHEN YOUR HANDS
ARE FULL

Sample
Chapter

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*Gospel Meditations
for Busy Moms*

Treasuring Christ

WHEN YOUR HANDS ARE FULL

Also by Gloria Furman:

Glimpses of Grace: Treasuring the Gospel in Your Home (2013)

SAMPLE CHAPTER
NOT FOR RESALE

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WHEN YOUR HANDS ARE FULL

Gospel Meditations for Busy Moms

GLORIA FURMAN

 **CROSSWAY**

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Treasuring Christ When Your Hands Are Full:
Gospel Meditations for Busy Moms*

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Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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First printing 2014

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-3888-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3889-6

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3890-2

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3891-9

***INSERT CIP INFORMATION HERE

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my mother, Catherine

Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction: Stamp Eternity on My Eyeballs	11

PART 1

GOD MADE MOTHERHOOD FOR HIMSELF

1 Hands Full of Blessings	23
2 God Displays His Handiwork in the Maternal Instinct	
3 Mommy Brain	
4 Family Tradition #1: We Always Need God's Grace	

PART 2

MOTHERHOOD AS WORSHIP

5 A Mother's "Call to Worship"	
6 A Mother's Love	
7 Mommy Doesn't Always Know Best	
8 The Good News and Mommy's No Good, Very Bad Day	

- 9 The Fictitious Mother of the Year
- 10 Mothers Are Weak, but He Is Strong
- 11 The Metanarrative of Motherhood
- Conclusion: A Mother's Testimony of Peace

Notes

Scripture Index

Acknowledgments

Thank you, *Jesus*, for building your church here in the Middle East. Thank you to *the older women at Redeemer Church of Dubai*, who take the instructions in Titus 2 seriously. You dote on the babes in Christ, instruct younger women, and teach what is good. Thank you for your faithful “mothering” as you exhort and encourage women to love their family and adorn the gospel. You’re a blessing to me and so many!

Thank you, *Cheryl Madewell*, for the countless hours you spent with me when I was a sophomore in college, teaching me to put great effort into studying and loving God’s Word. Thank you, *Ngoc Brown* and *Carolyn Wellons*, for teaching me that I need to treasure Christ in order to love my pastor-husband. Thank you, *Mary Waters*, for showing how the joy of the Lord is our strength to care for people through seasons of suffering. Thank you, *Kim Blough*, for sitting with me in that dark season in the desert when I felt that my hands would only ever be full of pain and hopelessness. You held out the hope of the gospel to me over and over again—thank you.

Acknowledgments

I'm thankful for these bloggers who specifically write and blog in order to point mothers to treasure Christ. Thank you for your friendship and sharpening influence, *Lindsey Carlson, Kimm Crandall, Christina Fox, Trillia Newbell, Luma Simms, and Jessica Thompson.*

It is a precious thing to have friends who pursue Christ through all the delights and sorrows of motherhood. Thank you, *Monica deGarmeaux* and *Laurie Cuchens*, for modeling this to me through both profound grief and joy. By God's grace, your lives testify that the God whom you worship is worthy of all praise.

Thank you to the team at *Crossway* (especially *Justin Taylor, Lydia Brownback, Josh Dennis, Amy Kruis, Angie Cheatham, and Janni Firestone*) for all the energy and hard work that was put into this book.

A huge thank you to my mom, *Catherine*, and my mother-in-law, *Basia*, who even from over 8,000 miles away find ways to creatively love and encourage our family.

Introduction

STAMP ETERNITY ON MY EYEBALLS

My hands were already full when I was pregnant with our first child.

They were full with books, jars, door handles, shower knobs, chairs, steering wheels, buttons, forks, and keyboards.

It was when I was pregnant with our first child that my husband began to suffer from chronic pain due to a nerve disorder in both of his arms. In a rather short period of time the stabbing, burning pain greatly restricted what Dave was able to do with his arms. “It’s amazing how much you need your arms,” Dave remarked one evening as I was hunched over my nine-months-pregnant belly helping him wrestle his socks on and tie his shoes. At that time we had very little idea of what his nerve disease would mean for our daily lives as parents. It’s been nearly eight years since his initial electric-like pains began. Over the years he has had multiple surgical procedures, and he’s still in pain. Dave describes it as a sort of “white noise.”

Introduction

A couple years ago, Dave got an infection that developed into a large boil on top of the nerves in his hand. Boils are a common affliction where we live in the Middle East, according to the doctors at the hospital where Dave was treated. He was hospitalized for three days as they took special care to rescue his hand. “What’s it like to be married to Job?” Dave joked as he was discharged from the hospital. It was good to see him smiling despite this ordeal. I was reminded of Job’s declaration of faith: “Though he slay me, I will hope in him” (Job 13:15). And I was sobered by the poor demonstration of the faith of Job’s wife, who said, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die” (Job 2:9). The impact of my godly, long-suffering husband has been a key influence in my motherhood.

Even against the backdrop of pain, I see abundant evidence of the grace of God at work in our lives. Through daily troubles we have opportunities to testify that “the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end” (Lam. 3:22).

I wanted to share that piece of my life with you because it has shaped my perspective on what it means to physically and emotionally have “your hands full.” Having more physical work in motherhood than I had anticipated forces me to look to the Lord for strength and provision. I’m learning firsthand how turning to the world for comfort and strength just leaves me dissatisfied and weak. God has used our family’s physical circum-

stances to point me to the one great permanent circumstance in my life—the gospel of Jesus Christ. I’m eager to share more about this with you and how it relates to motherhood.

My hands are full with hard work, helping my husband and raising our four children. Your hands are full, too, even if your circumstances as a mom are different from mine. In our cross-cultural work we’ve been privileged to travel the world, and now we live in a global city where people from over one hundred nationalities live together. Mothers are a diverse lot, but I think the statement is universally true—a mother’s hands are always full.

But what are they filled with?

Sometimes my playful son hands me boogers or indiscernible food matter from under his high chair as a present. My girls hand me cryptic notes saturated through with glitter pens. It’s part of my job as their mother to accept these love offerings with cheer (and sometimes hand sanitizer).

The old saying contains truth: “A mother’s work is never done.” As mothers go about their day caring for their children, they might physically carry them, gather random dishes from around the house, work to help provide for their children, pull squabbling siblings apart, turn pages in storybooks, and push the vacuum over trodden popcorn.

Mothers also have their hands full with hugs and high-

fives. It could go without saying that many times a day (or hour!), a mother might also wring her hands in frustration and lift up her hands in prayer as she cries out to God for help.

Whatever you feel that your hands are filled with—blessings or difficulties or a comingling of both—God’s Word contains specific encouragement for you.

There is more to be said about a mother’s work than the fact that it is hard and that it is never done. There is beauty and brilliance and God-given dignity to a mother’s work. I’ll talk about some of those things in this book.

But what I’m most concerned with communicating in these limited pages is that mothers can appreciate an even greater reality than the fact of their role as mothers. It doesn’t matter where you are from or what your circumstances are; the greatest reality a mother can appreciate and rest in is the work that Jesus has done on the cross on our behalf.

- Jesus’s purifying and cleansing work through the blood sacrifice of his own body on the cross is preeminent over the dirty laundry that is threatening an avalanche soon.
- Jesus’s victorious rising from the dead and triumph over death are preeminent over the chaos of your busy household as everyone is shuttled off to where they need to be for the day.
- Jesus’s sovereign reign over the cosmos and eschatological harnessing of everything under his feet are preeminent over the plans you’ve made for the evening, your busy

schedule this weekend, and the ideas you have about your child's future.

The Christian mother's hands are full with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3) and her work in nurturing children in the fear of the Lord is her privileged participation in God's work in uniting all things in Jesus (Eph. 1:10). This Jesus, whom we gladly serve, offers rest to mothers and fills our hands with his blessings. Day and night, moment by moment, we must choose to rest in Jesus. That's what it means to treasure Christ when your hands are full, whether you have one child or a dozen.

A mother who has been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ has an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for her (1 Pet. 1:3–4). Even as a mother's hands can be filled with troubles, back-breaking work, and frightening unknowns, she is being guarded by God's power through faith for a salvation to be revealed in the future (1 Pet. 1:5). Because of the gospel, we mothers can rejoice as we find our hands full of blessings in Jesus, because all we know is grace. Theologian Herman Bavinck said that based on Jesus's sacrifice for our sins on the cross, "God can wrench the world and humanity out of the grip of sin and expand his kingdom."¹ This is very, *very* good news.

I need to be reminded of this news all the time, dozens of times a day. I need reminders because I can defend and announce a biblical theology of God's grace to moth-

ers yet still not live in the identity and hope that God gives me.

THE GOOD NEWS FOR EVERY DAY

Jonathan Edwards used to pray and ask that God would “stamp eternity on my eyeballs.” This prayer has become my own heart’s request, too.

When your eyes are fixed on the horizon of eternity, it affects your vision for motherhood. We need to have eyes to see a view of God that is so big and so glorious that it transforms our perspective of motherhood. In the context of eternity, where Christ is doing his work of reigning over the cosmos, we need to see our mundane moments for what they really are—worship. In the daily (and nightly) work of mothering, we’re given dozens of invitations to worship God as he reminds us of the hope we have because of his gospel. My prayer is that you would see that the gospel is good news for mothers, not just on our “born again birthday,” but every single day.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit includes bringing our subjective insecurities as mothers in line with the objective reality of our eternal security in Christ. As mothers we need to train ourselves to focus on the things are unseen and eternal (2 Cor. 4:18). As we struggle to maintain this perspective *and* even as we fail to struggle, relenting to the temptation toward apathy, we must look to God’s Word and believe it, even when we can’t feel it. We need to be women of God’s Word whose daily petition is: “Teach me

your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name” (Ps. 86:11). As we walk in God’s truth, we also sense the Spirit’s invitations to pray. Although written to pastors, Martyn Lloyd-Jones’s words on prayer are relevant to us:

Always respond to every impulse to pray. . . . Where does it come from? It is the work of the Holy Spirit (Phil. 2:12–13). . . . So never resist, never postpone it, never push it aside because you are busy. . . . Such a call to prayer must never be regarded as a distraction; always respond to it immediately, and thank God if it happens to you frequently.²

A mother’s work is holy unto the Lord.

As mothers we look to Jesus not only as our example; we also see that he is our power to love God and our children. Because Christ has done for us what we could never do for ourselves, with *his* power we can ask forgiveness of our children when we sin against them, because God in Christ has forgiven us (Matt. 6:12–15; Mark 11:25; Col. 3:13). With *his* power we can humble ourselves in our work as mothers, because no one ever displayed more humility than our Redeemer as he abandoned his right to stay in heaven and died the death we deserve (Phil. 2:3–8). With *his* power can pursue our family with sacrificial love, because the Son gladly submitted to the Father’s will (John 5:20, 23; 14:30–31). And even when we fail to love as he loves, he is our righteousness. Jesus has done for us what

we could never do for ourselves. Jesus is our anchor, and he has anchored us in his love; nothing, nothing, *nothing* will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:39).

The gospel stands above and beyond all the most practical, family-friendly, or cost-effective philosophies of mothering. The good news of Jesus Christ is superior to our to-do lists and metaphorical mother-of-the-year trophies. This is because the greatest problem a mother has is not a lack of creativity, accomplishment, or skill, but her inability to love God and others as Jesus loves her (John 13:34). Without a mediator to speak for us, our sin will surely separate us from our holy God, both now and forever (Rom. 3:23). If you've never been alarmed by that idea and subsequently comforted by the cross of Jesus Christ, then I encourage you—please keep reading.

Treasuring Christ When Your Hands Are Full is not a to-do list on how to be a good mother. It's about our good God and what he has done. God's irresistible grace binds our wandering heart to himself and frees us to love him back and overflow in love to our neighbors. We have been ransomed from sin and death and given eternal life by the precious blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1:18–19). And because of Christ's work on the cross, we can live God's way of love in our homes and in the world even as our hands are full (Gal. 5:16–26; Eph. 4:17–6:18).

While I do not venture to give sage advice in the how-to's of mothering (my oldest child is still in primary

school), the application of the gospel to motherhood is immensely practical. I kept a note on my desktop while writing these pages. The note says: “Resist the urge to reduce God’s Word to nice tips for nice living: give them the gospel.”³ Bible-based tips never rescued anyone’s soul from destruction or carried along the whispers of eternal life into their mundane. Jesus saves, and the fruit of the Spirit is far sweeter than the fruitless flowers of mere moral living. God transforms us from the inside out. As Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs aptly put it, “Contentment is a sweet, inward heart-thing. It is a work of the Spirit indoors.”⁴

The circumstances of your motherhood may be difficult, troublesome, and confusing. Even so, there is a circumstance that supersedes all the complexities of your life. It is the simple truth that the one great, permanent circumstance in which you live is that you have been allowed to walk in newness of life as you are united to Christ by faith through grace. Our joy cannot be wrapped up in motherhood but only in God. All of us need to allow the Spirit do his “indoor work” and marvel as the Lord cultivates sweet, inward contentment in our heart as we learn to trust him.

Perhaps you woke up before the sun today so you could enjoy fellowship with the Lord and get some work done, and now the day feels like it is just dragging on. I’m with you. I don’t know how many times I’ve wondered: “Is it bedtime yet?” On days like this we need to remember that each day is like a sigh that is too brief to measure, yet it is

Introduction

chock full of eternal significance. And into this brief sigh of an ordinary day, the Holy Spirit erupts and overflows with the love of God in Christ into our heart. This is astonishing. Jesus invites us into something far more steadfast and indestructible than the permanent purple marker that your child used to decorate your ivory-colored kitchen cabinets. Because of his love, Jesus invites us to himself. He says in John 15:9, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.”

It is my prayer that what you find in this book points you to treasure Christ as he has filled your hands with the good work of mothering. I need to remember these things, too, so these gospel meditations could also be one long “note to self.” By God’s grace would he refresh our heart and renew our mind through his Word and his Spirit that we would marvel at “the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

PART 1

God Made Motherhood for Himself

Hands Full of Blessings

A few years ago our family was blessed to live in the upstairs bedrooms of a villa that housed our church offices and community space. There was always something exciting going on downstairs, whether it was youth group, Bible study, or a world-class international church potluck.

Even though people were in and out of our house all day and night, sometimes I got cabin fever. I got an itch to just get out of the house.

Thankfully, we lived down the street from a large shopping mall, so I could get out of the house (and avoid the sweltering desert heat). Sometimes I packed up the kids and took them window shopping, and I passed it off as an educational experience. “How many plates do you see stacked on this display table?” “Let’s make up a story about the models wearing winter coats.” “Who can spot the least expensive dress in this storefront?”

When I take my kids out to a public place like the mall,

GOD MADE MOTHERHOOD FOR HIMSELF

I become a sort of cat herder. (Can cats even be herded?) “Stay here with Mommy.” “Don’t touch that!” “Where did you pick *that* up? It doesn’t belong in your mouth.” “No scratching each other; only gentle hand-holding.” “Giddy-up, keep moving, folks.”

One time I was corralling my kittens into their seats at a table in the food court when a lovely woman sat down next to us.

There are hardly any “strangers” where we live, and the hospitality is impeccable. Hospitality extends beyond the living room as people cheerfully involve themselves in others’ lives as they go about their day. Their sense of community extends far beyond their personal friends. The African adage “It takes a village to raise a child” is not just a saying where I live but an honored, normative reality. Sometimes it seems that the camaraderie of merely sharing space in a line at the ATM is enough to facilitate community among people.

“You have your hands full!” our lunch companion beamed as she laid her hand on my younger daughter’s blond curls. “So beautiful! Mashallah” (Arabic for “God bless her”).

It used to bother me when people said that my hands were full.

Because I’m self-conscious and insecure, I would take these comments as an affront to my ability to parent my children well. I assumed that people who said this were implying that my children were ill-mannered and wild

and that I had no idea how to raise them, that my hands were full because I didn't have a handle on my careening, out-of-control motherhood. When I heard this comment, I would get defensive and haughty (and sometimes this is still a temptation).

Now, whenever someone tells me that I have my hands full, I agree with them for two reasons. The first reason I agree with people who say that my hands are full is that ninety-nine times out of one hundred, people mean that I *literally* have my hands full.

"Let me help you with that." The friendly woman stood up to take the tray I was holding as I attempted with my ankle to pull the baby's stroller closer to the table.

Second, I agree with people who say my hands are full, because my hands are not just full. They're *overflowing*—with blessings.

When people tell me that my hands are full, it's a good time to remember that it's true. "Yes! My hands are overflowing with God's gifts!"

The abundance of gifts that God has given me through motherhood is not quantifiable by the number of children I have or how delightful they are to me. The gifts that God has given mothers cannot be contained or quantified by their children.

EVERY MOTHER HAS HER HANDS FULL

There is real trouble, real discouragement, and real back-breaking work that comes with motherhood. To say, "Being

a mom isn't easy," is like saying, "Chocolate is yummy." This much is obvious. Just watch a mom who is nine months pregnant try to get out of a car and not pull any muscles in the attempt. Just listen to a mom share the aches in her heart for the child she is waiting to adopt. Or ask a mother to tell you her prayer requests. Being a mom isn't easy.

But sometimes mothers feel that their hands are full of inconvenience, thankless work, and futility. Maintaining the perspective that God has abundantly blessed you is a very real struggle. The fight for faith cannot be waged with the whimsical idea that you just need to see that "the glass is half full." The fight for faith should be addressed with sensitivity and grace and always subjected to the inerrant and authoritative Word of God.

I know that struggles, disappointments, and pain in motherhood are significant issues, so it is with all seriousness and sincerity that I remind myself what the apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 1:3–5: I have been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ, and I have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for me. Even as my life is full of heartaches and triumphant victories, unknowns and hopes, I am being guarded by God's power through faith for a salvation to be revealed in the future. Preaching the gospel to myself each day is the best way to remind myself that my life in Christ is *the* prevailing, permanent reality in my life. The indwelling Holy Spirit comforts my soul with the truths of God's Word.

When Jesus rescued me from hell, he also rescued me to himself. I have been spared an eternity of the just punishment that I deserve and have been handed life forever with my Savior. He took that cup—filled to the brim with the wrath of God against sin—and he drank it to the dregs. Then he didn't hand me back an empty cup (which itself would have been a mercy of unspeakable worth).⁵ The Bible says that my glass isn't merely half full. Because of Jesus, our cup is filled to overflowing with God's blessings (Ps. 23:5).

I know that I may not be rescued from the next blow-out diaper that leaks onto the floorboard of my car while I'm stuck in traffic with whining children who just want to get out and play. But because of the gospel I am rescued from having to respond to those troubles in the way my sinful flesh would prefer—I am strengthened by grace because I've been given the righteousness of Jesus Christ when I *do* respond sinfully. Because of the gospel I can also see God's good intentions to fulfill his promises to me in making me like Christ and drawing me nearer to himself. These are just a few of the ways the rubber meets the road when considering the gospel in daily life as a mom.

How does the gospel of Jesus Christ impact your life in a significant way when your seasonal reality seems to be absorbed by mundane things like bodily-fluid accidents and temper tantrums at the grocery store?

Anyone can advise you on how to deal with these practical, tangible things. For example, someone could suggest

that you buy a poncho and wear it until your children are in junior high. To stifle your public temper tantrums, perhaps you could go into a closet and tantrum your temper in private. Oh? You thought I meant your *kid's* temper tantrum in the grocery store? Well, that's a different thing altogether!

Even if your first child has only just been conceived in your womb, or if you've recently been approved for an adoption, you can already taste the goodness of God to you in motherhood.

When I view motherhood *not* as a gift from God to make me holy but rather as a role with tasks that get in my way, I am missing out on one of God's ordained means of spiritual growth in my life. Not only that, but I am missing out on *enjoying God*. No amount of mommy angst can compare to the misery that comes from a life devoid of the comforting, encouraging, guarding, providing, satisfying presence of our holy God.

I want for myself what Paul wanted for his beloved Philippians: "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you" (Phil. 4:9). I want God's peace to rule my motherhood.

I want for myself what the writer of Hebrews wanted for his readers: "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). I want to live each day in the way that I learned Christ—that is, by grace through faith. I need to put off

the old self, being renewed in the spirit of my mind, and put on the new self that is created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:20–24). John Owen commented on the role of the gospel in this pursuit: “What then is holiness? Holiness is nothing but the implanting, writing, and living out of the gospel in our souls (Eph. 4:24).”⁶

This life of grace-infused faith would do wonders for the way I parent my children, of course, but what’s more, it keeps my gaze fixed on God. It could be said that the most loving command in the Bible is this one:

Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Behold your God!” (Isa. 40:9)

I want to be counted among those who “will see the Lord.”
I want to behold my God!

GIFTS WITH A HOLY PURPOSE

The gifts that God gives us serve this holy purpose—to direct our praise to the giver of those gifts. If you enjoy the gift of your children and the gift of your motherhood, but your joy terminates in those gifts, then you’ve missed the point of the gifts.

GOD MADE MOTHERHOOD FOR HIMSELF

The gift of motherhood points mothers to treasure Jesus Christ as he transforms our heart from the inside out.

That's the subject I am going to unpack in this book. In case you're too busy to read the rest of it (I know what that's like!), the gist of my thesis is this:

Because of the gospel—the news about what Jesus did on the cross to save sinners—mothers who make Christ their treasure can rejoice in their work as God works in them.

Because of Jesus, all a Christian knows is grace upon grace upon grace. By God's grace, our hands are filled to overflowing according to his riches in Christ Jesus. These riches include the fruit of the Holy Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). Mothers “who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:24). Mothers who live by the Holy Spirit should also keep in step with him (Gal. 5:25). So, as Paul exhorts us, “Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another” (Gal. 5:26). We should pursue peace with one another instead, and build one another up in our most holy faith. Even these manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit aren't an end in themselves. When God goes about his work of making us holy, he has an end in mind—our glorification together with Christ Jesus.

Read Romans 8:12–17 with yourself in mind. “So then,
_____ . . .”

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Yes, mother, your hands are full, literally. And your hands are filled to overflowing with grace by the one who stretched his hands out for you on the cross.



978-1-4335-3888-9
Paperback, \$10.99
Available March 2014

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Grocery shopping. Soccer practice. Dirty dishes.

Motherhood is tough, and it often feels like the to-do list just gets longer and longer every day—making it hard to experience true joy in God, our children, and the gospel.

In this encouraging book for frazzled moms, Gloria Furman helps us reorient our vision of motherhood around what the Bible teaches. Showing how to pursue a vibrant relationship with God—even when discouragement sets in and the laundry still needs to be washed—this book will help you treasure Christ more deeply no matter how busy you are.

“These pages are filled with such helpful honesty and gospel centrality as we’re invited to look at the wonderful and messy world of motherhood!”

KRISTYN GETTY, hymn writer and recording artist

“There’s nothing simplistic or syrupy here. This book presents deep wisdom that is sure to generate joy in the homes and hearts of many moms.”

NANCY GUTHRIE, Bible teacher; author, *Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament Bible study series*

“Moms don’t need another book telling them how short they fall. Moms need a book that will lift their eyes away from themselves and onto Christ. Gloria has delivered just that book.”

JESSICA THOMPSON and ELYSE FITZPATRICK, coauthors, *Give Them Grace*

GLORIA FURMAN is a wife, mother of four young children, doula, and blogger. In 2008, her family moved to the Middle East to plant Redeemer Church of Dubai, where her husband, Dave, serves as the pastor. She is the author of *Glimpses of Grace: Treasuring the Gospel in Your Home* and blogs regularly at the Gospel Coalition, Desiring God, and GloriaFurman.com.

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Treasuring Christ When Your Hands Are Full
will be published by Crossway in March 2014.
ISBN: 978-1-4335-3888-9, Paperback, \$10.99

For more information about this book or
the author, please contact Crossway directly.
Phone: 800-323-3890 | E-mail: sales@crossway.org