

DETOURED

JEN BABAKHAN



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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Cover design by Connie Gabbert Design + Illustration

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Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409-5370, www.booksandsuch.com.

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Copyright © 2019 by Jen Babakhan
Published by Harvest House Publishers
Eugene, Oregon 97408
www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-7673-2 (pbk.)
ISBN 978-0-7369-7674-9 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Babakhan, Jen, 1981- author.

Title: Detoured / Jen Babakhan.

Description: Eugene : Harvest House Publishers, 2019.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019004513 (print) | LCCN 2019008939 (ebook) | ISBN 9780736976749 (ebook) | ISBN 9780736976732 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Mothers--Religious life. | Motherhood--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Vocation--Christianity. | Identity (Psychology)--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Change (Psychology)--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4529.18 (ebook) | LCC BV4529.18 .B32 2019 (print) | DDC 248.8/431--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019004513>

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Printed in the United States of America

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 / BP-AR / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents



| | |
|--|-----|
| Release and Surrender | 9 |
| 1. Having It All Isn't the Goal | 13 |
| 2. Making Room for Honesty | 31 |
| 3. This Was Not in the Job Description | 47 |
| 4. Netflix and Pajamas | 69 |
| 5. Good Grief | 87 |
| 6. More Than Motherhood | 107 |
| 7. Finding Your Way Back to You | 131 |
| 8. Making Friends with Telemarketers | 149 |
| 9. The New Friend in the Mirror | 171 |
| 10. The Beauty and the Balance | 187 |
| Notes | 199 |



Having It All Isn't the Goal

The Lie We All Believe

*For everything there is a season; a time
for every activity under heaven.*

Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NLT)

In the fall of 2011, I stood in front of a classroom full of parents. I was eight months pregnant, glistening with sweat (I appreciated those who lied and said I was glowing), and breathlessly gave my Back-to-School Night parent information speech. I told the parents listening intently that I would eagerly return to finish the year as their child's third-grade teacher. I had every intention of returning to work in a few short months. I was determined to do the exact thing I had seen countless colleagues do: prepare a long-term substitute to teach my class, have the baby, learn how to do the mothering thing well, and drop the baby off with a sitter. Like a well-executed

lesson plan, life with baby would fall into place seamlessly because I was prepared.

As the parents filed out of my classroom that night, one of the mothers hesitated in the doorway. She looked into my eyes, her own shining with tears, and said, “Please take all the time you can with your baby. You will never have this time back.” She patted my shoulder and wished me well, and I felt conflicted in a way I hadn’t before. I brushed off her comment and told myself I was making too much of it. My colleagues came back to work after maternity leave tired and tearful, but they did it. Their classrooms continued to run like well-oiled machines, and they didn’t miss a beat. I would do the same.

My son Bryce was born in the wee hours of a September morning, blue and breathless, and given to a waiting respiratory team in the delivery room. It felt like a year passed in the few seconds it took him to take his first breath, but when he did, the entire room let out cheers of joy. In that moment, as I watched his purple-tinged toes turn pink, I felt indescribable joy for the first time in my life. I was a Mother. It felt like the title I was born to hold.

In the sleep-deprived days that followed, I continuously tried to make myself comfortable with the fact that I was going to eventually leave my son and return to my classroom. As I held Bryce, sleeping against my chest just hours after his birth, I turned to my husband, Ed, and said, “I’m not going back to work.” I said it knowing that we could never afford for me to quit my job, but I needed to say the words that my soul would not stop whispering. Ed chuckled and responded, “Okay. You will eventually, though, right?” I’m still grateful that he responded so graciously and without expressing any fear about our finances. He wanted me to be home with our son, too, as impossible as it felt financially.

Before I had Bryce, my image of a stay-at-home mother was June

Clever. She baked cookies and cleaned, and her children always behaved and left her alone to bake cookies and clean. I didn't want that for myself. Prior to teaching I worked in marketing and frequently traveled the country for business. I loved the excitement of seeing new places, flying into new airports, and having hotel rooms all to myself. I had worked hard to get my college degree. I loved dressing professionally, going to upscale work events, and handing out business cards with my name on them. I made the career change to become a teacher when traveling lost its luster and I no longer felt inspired by the work I was doing. As a child, I'd dreamed of being a teacher, and I felt God calling me to the classroom. And so I went. In 2007 I did the unthinkable and quit my incredibly secure job to enter the budget-impaired field of public education.

It took me a year to get hired, and two years later I earned my permanent status in the district. I loved teaching. I loved decorating my classroom and watching struggling students learn how to multiply and read. It felt amazing when parents asked me for advice about how to help their child at home. I felt knowledgeable. Competent. I felt important.

The year I earned my long-awaited tenure was also the year I resigned.

What Happens When You're Forced Off the Fence

I struggled to make sense of my decision. I shouldn't have been so surprised that life would throw a curveball when I least expected.

Two years before, I had rescued a German shepherd puppy from a man who seemingly appeared out of nowhere. "Hey, you want a dog?" he yelled above the din of the midafternoon traffic.

When I heard him shouting, I was running along the side of

the road chasing a small dog that had nearly been hit by a car. Driving home from school, I pulled to the side of the road to try to help the dog find its owner. That's when the man appeared and asked if I would rescue the puppy he held in his arms, the puppy that he no longer wanted. He held up a three-pound ball of shivering fluff that I instantly agreed to take home and convince Ed we needed to keep.

I can still remember the feeling of her muddy paws soaking through my jeans on the way home as I thought of all the ways I could plead her case to stay with us. When Ed saw the adorable pup, he instantly agreed to keep her, and we jointly decided to table any plans of having children. We had been on the fence about having kids for a while, and we frequently waffled back and forth between adopting a dog and having a baby. *Were we cut out to be good parents? Did we have what it would take to raise a child?* My personal fear of carrying a child reflected my own doubt in my ability to handle a pregnancy and the morning sickness that was sure to come with it. *How would I go to work every day sick?* Having a baby right now seemed inconvenient at best and, at worst, impossible. Surely, the arrival of the dog in our lives was a sign we were meant to have a dog and not a baby.

We spent the next weekend purchasing every kind of puppy product we could find at the local pet supply store—even though I felt a nagging sense that we had chosen wrong. *Was a puppy truly the right decision? It had to be*, I reasoned with myself. *We had a new puppy!* Why couldn't I silence the soft voice within that told me motherhood was a risk worth taking?

Two days later God proved Himself faithful to answer: My shaking hand held a positive pregnancy test, and my heart held wonder and disbelief. We had chosen wrong. God, in His infinite mercy, gave us the chance to experience both options simultaneously so that we would know what our hearts—and what He—really desired

for our lives. I realized then that my own fears of becoming pregnant (and nauseated constantly) left no room for the work and provision of Christ in my life.

My fears left no room for the work and provision of Christ in my life.

I had forgotten that the God I serve was intimately aware of my fear—and abundantly equipped to resolve it. We were able to find the puppy a wonderful home (I knew my limits, and training a puppy and having a baby at the same time were beyond them), and I knew that my pregnancy was a gift beyond measure.

Yet, two years and a baby later, none of my life made sense. I was finally going to have it all, the way I thought God intended, and yet I felt as though my plan for the perfect life was falling apart. I made it through my pregnancy without vomiting in front of my third-grade students (a miracle in itself), and I survived labor and childbirth. *Wasn't that enough challenging of the false beliefs I held about God?* Three months after I gave birth, my newborn baby began bleeding internally due to a sensitivity to milk protein. After appointments with pediatric allergists and specialists, it became clear that Bryce's diet (and mine, since I breastfed) would require close supervision and that healing would take place over a period of months.

My plan for the perfect life was falling apart.

My infant son had a severe dairy intolerance that required me to be home with him. The choice between working and staying home

with Bryce was no longer mine to make. Ed and I would have to find a way to make it work financially. And yet I still went in circles in my mind. *Was this truly what I was meant to do? Did I come this far professionally only to give it all up? And I just got tenure! Who does this? Besides, my students and their parents expected me to return to work, as I had emphatically promised I would.* So much had changed since I had last stood in front of them...

Then came the guilt. The arrival of motherhood brought with it a love for my child so intense I couldn't fathom my heart or body being big enough to contain it all. From the very moment I laid eyes on Bryce's face—swollen and wrinkly from delivery—I knew that the love washing over me was different from any I'd ever felt. *If I loved my son so much, why was I struggling with this?* Bryce needed me, and he was my top priority now—not my work, my goals, or my dreams. Could it really be that God was again asking me to trust His strength instead of my own?

For so many of us, the choice between working outside of the home and staying home with our children was made for us. Perhaps your child has a health condition that requires you to be home, or maybe you simply cannot afford daycare so you quit your job. Before I became pregnant with my first son, I often told my coworkers that if I ever had a child, I would want to stay home. I said it in passing, often after a frustrating day of pouring myself into other people's children. Why wouldn't I want to offer all of me to my own?

And yet when it came time to actually stay home with my son, the choice was more difficult than I had anticipated. I can remember the exact moment I signed my letter of resignation. Emotions flooded me, all of them funneled into the checkmark I made in a box next to the words stating I would not return to work the following school year. Tears filled my eyes as, conflicted, I breathed a sigh of relief. I felt as though I was finally free of so many burdens

and worries that had filled my mind in the months leading up to the decision. I was finally on an endless summer vacation with my sweet son, and it felt too good to be true.

As soon as I allowed my mind to venture into the unfettered joy of following God's direction, I heard the negative voice I knew too well begin to weigh in. *What if you just made a huge mistake?* it whispered. In that moment, I reminded myself I hadn't and brushed it off. *I can always go back when Bryce is older*, I consoled myself. I glanced over at my boy, playing quietly by himself, oblivious to what felt like a life-changing moment for Mom, and knew I had made the right decision. I was meant to be home with him, and I *wanted* to be. Even though I knew being home was both right and what I wanted, I could never have predicted the emotional tidal wave that would wash over me the following two years.

All of our stories are different, but we have all believed the same lie—that it is possible to “have it all.” We believe that not only is it possible, but that lots of other women have found the secret to having it all. We look at our neighbors, friends, even women in the grocery store and think, *She's got it together*. The biggest lie, however, is that we should want it all. We accept the idea that, in order to live complete lives, we need full-to-the-brim social, work, and home lives, with the right balance of “me” time—and all of this documented on social media. Yet our children clamor for 99.8 percent of our attention, and we feel guilty for being overwhelmed. If all of the social events, careers, family, and friends were stripped away, who would we even be?

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and friends were stripped away,
who would we even be?*

Can I tell you a secret? “Having it all” is not the goal. The first moment I held Bryce, heaven still fresh on his breath, I knew that it wasn’t. In that hospital room, silent and still after the chaos of birth, I felt my world tilt on its axis. No longer was I concerned about lessons or e-mails; none of that mattered anymore. *This*, I felt Jesus whisper to my soul. *This is what life really is—here in your arms*. I could sit and weep as I remember those early moments in that dimly lit hospital room when I felt as though heaven had revealed itself to me in an instant. Sirens blared in the distance as ambulances pulled into the emergency bay of the hospital, and there I sat in serenity, embracing new life and all it now held for me.

The secret to fulfillment isn’t striving to have it all. It never has been. When we can rest in our security as children of God, we are given extraordinary freedom to enjoy the moments that make up a life. No longer are we slaves to striving and competing for the best God has to offer—because we are certain it is already ours.

I don’t believe that God wants us to frantically flit from one thing to another, never pausing to inhale the delight of the present...and exhale gratitude for His gifts. He wants us to be here, in this moment, and grateful. The present is the only place we can truly sit with God. We can’t follow Him anywhere else.

When I was knee-deep in new motherhood, I couldn’t see past the next minute. During my pregnancy I read every book about babies I could get my hands on. I read about getting a baby to nurse correctly, to sleep correctly, and to calm down correctly. I was so intent on getting it right that I overlooked that whole “babies are actually tiny and unique humans” thing. Somehow it escaped me as a new mother that, once I actually had a baby in my arms, I might have some opinions and thoughts about what *my* individual child needed. As I held Bryce in my arms, not the hypothetical picture of a baby, the books and information became irrelevant.

Motherhood looked different—it *felt* different—from what I expected. All I knew was that my newborn son needed to be nursed every eight minutes (not the two hours the baby books promised), and I never understood how desperately a human needs sleep until I had not gotten more than thirty minutes in a row for days on end.

June Cleaver was nowhere to be found, and I was convinced that making cookies or cleaning would never happen in my house again. Nothing in my life was recognizable anymore, and I couldn't understand why I wasn't happy. My baby was healthy, and so was I. Was that not enough for me? I had so much to be thankful for, and the guilt I felt because of my lack of appreciation threatened to consume any ounce of joy I allowed myself to feel. *You're home while the rest of the world has to work. Your life is so easy. You don't deserve any of this. Take a walk! Vacuum again—do something!* I would chide myself.

If my day wasn't filled with activities that were meaningful and enriching to my baby, clearly I was failing in every way. I was letting God down. Being present in the moment felt both uncomfortable and like too much work. I hated being alone with my thoughts. Like an athlete who began a race before warming up, my mind would catapult to the future: I was always wondering when I would find the peace I craved—and skipping the important work of being still before God. As the months after I resigned continued on, my depression felt as though it came from an unexpected place. I was ashamed to admit what it was, so I threw all my energy into being the best stay-at-home mother I could possibly be. In between nursing for the umpteenth time, changing diapers, and giving my son his allotted ten minutes of “tummy time” every few hours, I cleaned like my hair was on fire. No dish ever sat in the sink, the floors were mopped every Monday, and the laundry was always done (never put away, though; I wasn't *that* crazy).

I was on my phone, scrolling through my Facebook feed, whenever I had the chance. While the baby nursed, I scrolled, endlessly, through image after image of other women, other moms, old coworkers who had it all. And I wondered, *Why wasn't I able to do it? What didn't I have that everyone else had? Why had the desire to be home with my child been placed so heavily on my chest that I couldn't breathe when I thought about returning to work?* I could not understand why such an easy decision was also the most difficult.

What I didn't recognize within myself was the deeply embedded belief that if others experienced success, there wouldn't be any left over for me. The coworkers who continued to work, achieving Teacher of the Year nominations and earning higher-level credentials, were not taking away my ability to one day do the same. Their success did not ensure my failure. God was asking me to turn my eyes to Him, not to the gifts He had given others. My heart fought with my head. My head fought with God. And His answer was clear whether or not I wanted to hear it: I was to stay home. My son needed me. My colleagues were on a different path. I heard God's gentle but firm voice in my heart. And it hurt.

While I—with tear-filled eyes—told my supervising principal about my dilemma, Bryce babbled happily atop the round meeting table. I had sat there so many times before to discuss students' growth or achievements. Al was already one of my favorite principals, someone many of us teachers looked to for guidance from his wealth of experience in the classroom.

"My wife took some time off, too, when our boys were little," he said, his eyes sparkling. "She taught, too, but spent those years at home with them, and it was wonderful."

I instantly felt my tears recede, and the lump in my throat grew smaller. Hearing him confirm that my decision to leave the classroom, for at least a little while, was a good one—or at least not

unheard of—was a welcome change from the noise in my head that said I was making a bad career choice and that I'd never recover whatever I was sure to lose. I can see now that the voices I battled internally fed off my fear.

I still battle the voices sometimes. Now they tell me that if and when I return to work, I'll be too outdated and less knowledgeable than my coworkers. Maybe you sometimes feel the same. While the world of our fellow professionals keeps spinning, and the promotions roll in for those we once stood shoulder-to-shoulder with, our lives at home can feel suspended in time. We are moving for sure. In fact, it feels like we never sit still! But are we getting anywhere? The answer, of course, is that we certainly are. In these days of mundane kid chaos at home, our worlds are spinning faster than we realize.

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than we realize.*

The speed at which our kids grow up is one of the many reasons it's vital for you to have something that is only yours and ignites a passion within you. At some point, your children will no longer need you in the same way they do now, and it's important you don't look to them for your own fulfillment. Only Christ can give us the kind of soul-fullness we seek, and we are made to embrace the abundance He offers us in all areas of life. (More on that later.)

Perhaps you question how you'll ever compete with the fresh-faced college graduates who know the latest buzzwords to use in an interview. In the end, it's all fear—and fear leaves no room for the One who came to conquer fear to work.

The woman described in Proverbs 31 comes to mind. She's often

referred to as the virtuous woman, and the writer described in great detail her many admirable qualities. She's the epitome of a good wife and mother, and she tends to her family and their faith with great care. Verse 25 reads, "She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she laughs without fear of the future." We don't need to fear the future because God is already there—and when we trust Him, we can rejoice in the present as well as the future.

The moment you're living right now was the future at some point, and it was planned by your heavenly Father with your very best in mind. We can trust Him to take care of all of our days—even when we cannot imagine how they might look. Your life and all of its ordinary details are in His hands. He is more than capable of handling your future according to His purpose...if you let Him.

Raising two boys often feels like being a visitor in a foreign country. The world of my boys is often filled with the seemingly constant need to assess who is winning and losing in everything from getting in the car the fastest to putting toothpaste on their toothbrush before bed. I'm constantly hearing these words come out of my mouth: "It's not a competition." The thing is, for a long time I didn't believe my own words, and sometimes I still struggle with them.

Life is not a competition, but when you see your peers achieving things you once planned for yourself, it can sting a little (a lot) and feel like a competition that you're losing. Perhaps you hear through the grapevine that the coworker you used to chat with over coffee is promoted to vice president or makes partner. On the outside you're excited and congratulating her, but inwardly you're battling the jealousy you deny you harbor.

The belief that the success of others ensures our own failure is so deeply embedded in our culture that it's almost expected that envy or jealousy of others will arrive with the delivery of positive news. Engagements, pregnancy announcements, and weddings all bring

out similar emotions and thoughts that we'd rather deny we experience. Think back to the years prior to getting married or having kids. Every time a friend of yours announced her engagement or pregnancy, I'm willing to bet that, deep down, you felt as though her good news somehow meant that these things were now less possible for you.

It might have been sheer disappointment that God's timing for your friend was not the same as His for you. While these emotions are valid—and I don't think we need to shame ourselves for any emotion—we do need to fact-check them to avoid being swept away by a wave of jealousy or disappointment. We have to be willing to become aware of our own false beliefs and unfounded thought patterns so that our response to other people's good news is genuine and loving. We know there is no shortage of good gifts from God.

When God calls us to something, there is no promise of painless transition. Following Him will cost us, and pain will be involved. Motherhood is a sacrifice in itself: We give our bodies over to join with the Creator in the act of creation, with the hope of a great reward for our offering. For some of you, this process was filled with heartache and dashed hopes. Having a child became something you not only dreamed about, but also placed on a pedestal built of high expectations and sheer determination to feel joyful regardless of your reality. If you fall in that category and having a baby didn't come easily, giving yourself the permission to admit you don't always enjoy motherhood without also feeling shame can be close to impossible. Motherhood isn't easy for any of us regardless of how we entered into it.

The challenge is not only the emotional fortitude that motherhood requires. We give of our physical and mental strength as we tirelessly care for our children, bending but not breaking, over and over again. How many nights have you gone to bed with an aching

back after holding a sleeping baby for much of the day? Even if your children are no longer in the infant stage, I'm sure you can recall the feeling.

After our babies grow into toddlers, the exquisite maternal joys are peppered more often with frustrations we hesitate to speak aloud lest we be seen as imperfect mothers. The moments of wonder, cradling tiny feet in our hands, are replaced with exasperated sighs when food is thrown and tiny tempers flare. We recall so easily when our hearts were beautifully broken with love in the first breathtaking moments after birth, and we struggle to recover this same emotion.

That was the motherhood we signed up for. This one, with the toddler and his clenched fists of fury, is not. This is the beautiful breaking down, the relentless turning inside out, that is motherhood, with all of its joy and imperfection. It is ever-changing and consistently humbling. If our footing is not secure on the unshakable foundation of Jesus, we are easily lost in a sea of shifting emotion, constantly searching for shore. Our emotions are many things, but accurate gauges of our mothering ability or of our value, they are not.

Some things are so sacred, so holy, that they deserve our unwavering attention. Our worth in Christ, especially if we are unaware of it, is one of those things. When God sees that we need a refresher course in what we mean to Him and who we are in Him, He will ensure we get it. Now, in this new chapter of your life's story, you are letting go of what was once the trophy in your hand. The thing that declared to the world you were worthy, strong, and qualified. Your career or professional life is on the back burner, and you have a new journey to walk with God. He's asking you to stop striving for approval and achievement and to place your trust in who He says you are: worthy, righteous, beloved. These are the only titles your

soul has truly ever held. His credentials are the only ones you need. You are anchored in Christ.

*Our worth in Christ is a truth
so sacred, so holy, that it deserves
our unwavering attention.*

When Achievement Becomes a Slippery Slope

I can remember the first time I felt the warm rush of adrenaline from an achievement. My parents and I were visiting my paternal grandparents and had just finished eating my grandmother's incredible fried chicken for dinner. We sat at the shiny wooden table in their kitchen, a large window on one side, and, on the other, a yellow clock shaped like an apple that ticked loudly whenever the room grew silent.

My Grandmother Alice's kitchen was a place of good food and even better memories, and as a little girl I loved nothing more than knowing there were *always* homemade cookies in the cookie jar sitting atop her oak china cabinet. Sitting around the table were aunts and uncles as well, and I was the only child there. I was around eight at the time, and I loved to read. I voraciously read anything I could find: cereal boxes at breakfast, magazines, and any book that happened to be lying within eyesight.

My mother was proud of my reading ability that exceeded my grade level, and she often beamed with pride as she told others about the books I was able to read. When the conversation turned to my academic accomplishments that night, my aunt, a college student at the time, left the table and returned with one of her college

textbooks. She flipped to a random page in the center of the book and asked me if I could read it. I remember feeling nervous, but exhilarated, at the chance to show the adults in the room how well I could read, and I read the text without trouble, the slightest tremble evident in my voice. They praised me excitedly when I closed the book—and I've never quite forgotten that feeling. Accomplished. Proud. Talented. Able.

Approval and acceptance are among the most powerful feelings we can experience. When either of these is threatened, the natural response is to show the world that we are worthy of both. These emotions are so powerful that we easily become swept away in the act of proving ourselves without recognizing the truth of the matter: We have eternal approval and acceptance. We need not earn it. If I had been unable to read the passage in my aunt's college textbook, would my parents have loved me less? Not at all. Though I yearned to make them proud at that dinner table so many years ago, their approval and love never depended on my reading ability. It's the same with God. At His table, you are exceedingly loved, eternally accepted, and forever approved to sit with Him.

We have eternal approval and acceptance. We need not earn it.

What are you most scared of losing? Is it the approval you once felt or the rush of accomplishment when a goal was met? I don't believe God is asking you to lose all motivation to achieve goals. I do believe He's holding you by the shoulders and slightly shifting you to face a new direction that you'll walk together. The goals He will encourage you to set in the future will look a lot different from the

ones you're used to, but God-set goals are the only ones you want to achieve anyway, right?

When we are secure in our position with our heavenly Father, competition and envy fade away. Suddenly, the mom in the check-out line next to you with the designer diaper bag and the screaming toddler is your sister in battle. Like you, she's just one naptime away from finding her serenity for the day.

None of us “have it all” at the same time. There is no perfect life. There is only Christ's perfect love, always present, always guiding us to turn to Him for a glimpse at the perfection our hearts long for. Don't be fooled by the feigned perfection that so many try to display. The mom with the perfectly matched outfits and silky-smooth hair doesn't have it all. She's one thrown sippy cup away from a breakdown too. We can't let ourselves get lost in wanting someone else's life. This is it. This is our allotted time to experience life with all of its tender beauty and aching sorrows. Let's not spend it comparing and despairing because we believe the lie that perfection is possible outside of Christ.

This is your path, your motherhood journey, and yours are the children God has entrusted to you. It doesn't all make sense right now. It really doesn't have to. For right now, serve God with all that you have, and be content to know that you are enough because He is enough. The rest will fall into place. You'll see.

→ Reflection Questions

1. When you reflect on the moment you decided to stay home, what are the prominent emotions you experience?
2. How has motherhood shifted your perspective on your purpose? Is it a welcomed or resented shift? Why?

→ Talk to Him About It

Lord, show me how my desire to have it all has blinded me to Your will for my life. Guide me into the nearness with You that I yearn to experience. Help me release this fear that whispers that I'm not enough as I am. I trust You, Lord. Amen.