

Hard  
*Is Not the*  
Same Thing  
*as* Bad

Abbie Halberstadt  
Illustrations by Lindsay Long



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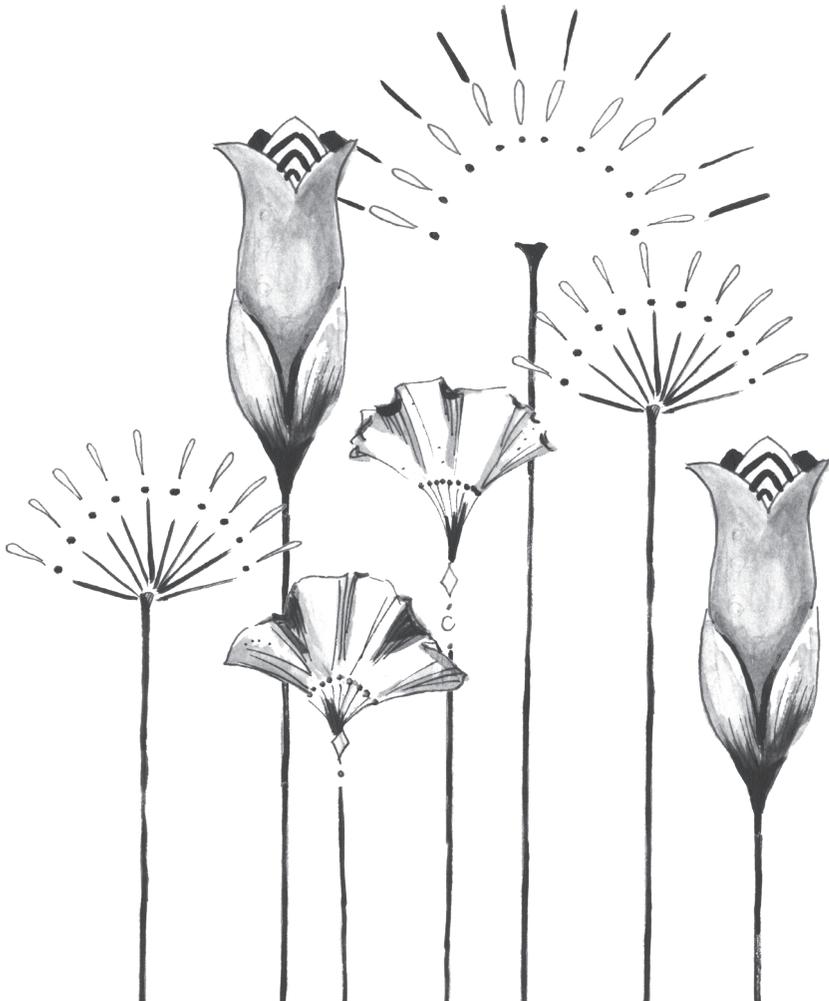
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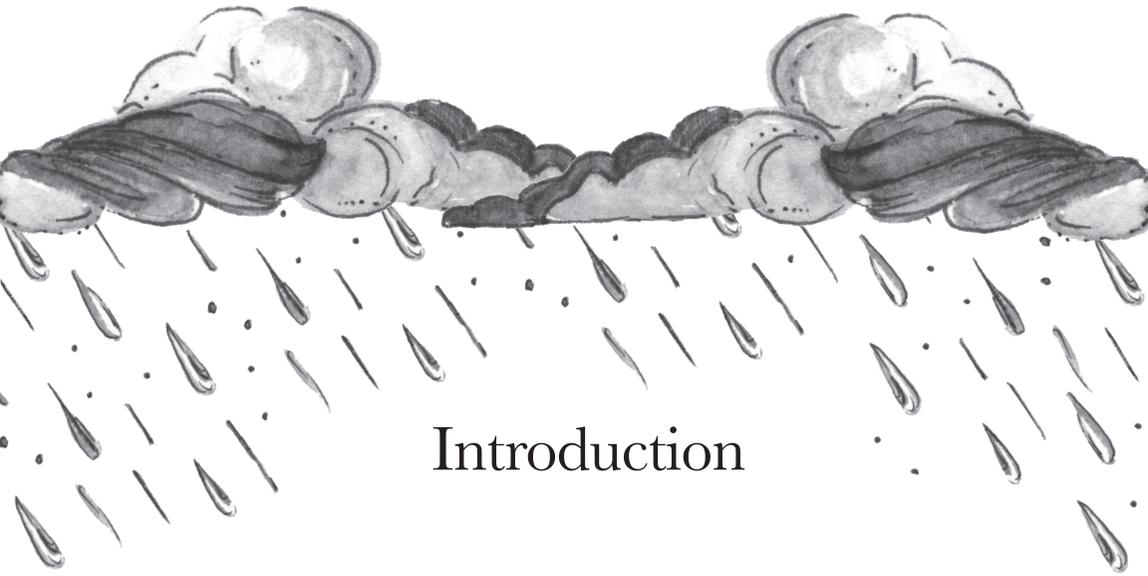
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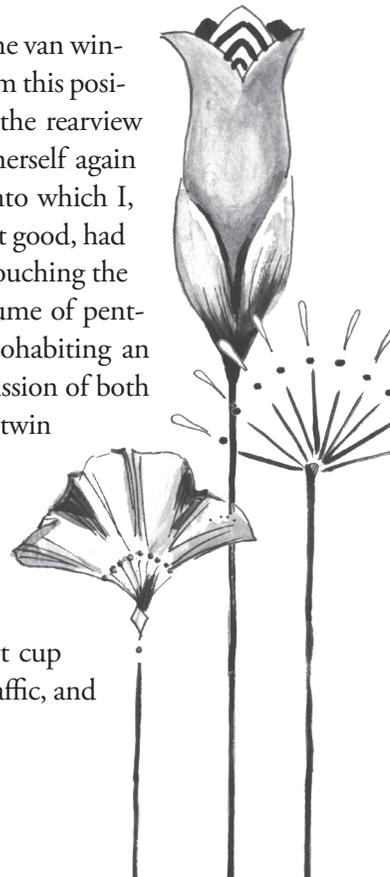




## Introduction

I pressed the left side of my forehead hard against the van window, which was the only cool thing in the car. From this position, I could still watch the road and glance at the rearview mirror to see if Nola had managed to emancipate herself again from the torture device (also known as a car seat) into which I, the mother who claimed to love her and desire her best good, had so callously buckled her. Every part of my body not touching the window pulsed with heat, thanks to the sheer volume of pent-up toddler angst coupled with acute Mom Stress cohabiting an enclosed space. (I'm sharing this story with the permission of both Evy and Nola, my precious, wonderful eleven-year-old twin daughters.)

I yanked my head away from the glass as one of Nola's arms snaked free of its restraint, and she began shoving the chest clasp down toward her belly with the kind of superhuman three-year-old strength that belied her utter inability to peel the top off a yogurt cup without help. I pulled over as soon as I saw a gap in traffic, and



by the time I had swan-dived over the driver's seat, impaling my own belly on the headrest (you're welcome, fellow drivers, for this brazen display of my backside), Nola had wrenched both arms free and was fumbling with the clasp at her waist.

Tears pooled in her Disney princess-sized blue eyes, adding a tragic sheen of desperation to her plight. But it was the soundtrack to all this drama—the piteous wail of betrayal emanating from her wide-open mouth—that really underscored the fact that I could do nothing to redeem myself. Nothing except free her, of course.

But that's not what I did. Instead, for the third time in fifteen minutes, I reinserted her arms into the straps, slid the buckle up to the middle of her chest, and, grimly resigned to the death of my hearing, tightened down the belt yet again.

The tenor of her wail changed as I heaved myself back into the front seat. What had been a plaintive cry became a screech of such rage that the hairs on my arms prickled with apprehension. And then the thrashing started. Soon I forgot my concern for my own eardrums and began to worry she would do herself actual harm.

Over the course of the next twenty minutes, I pulled over no fewer than four times to rebuckle her, each time pleading, praying, singing, chiding, and soothing in a vain attempt to convince my car-seat-averse daughter that staying buckled would keep her safe. By the time I parked the van in our garage and numbly slid the keys from the ignition, the conclusion to a forty-five-minute commute that should have taken twenty, Nola's shrieks had quieted slightly as her voice gave out in hoarse croaks of protest.

My chest constricted as I noticed the angry red welts on her neck from her side-to-side body slams against the straps. She was sweating and disheveled, her eyes both wild and weary. I'm sure I looked much the same. Honestly, I no longer knew what I felt. My brain had been pummeled into a bloody pulp of emotions: anger, defeat, despair, sadness for Nola, self-pity.

And dread.

Because tomorrow, I would bundle all my offspring—at the time, six kids

aged nine and under—into the car, just as I usually did five days a week for our commute to the gym where I taught fitness classes. I would track down the shoes, change the diapers, fill the sippy cups, gather the snacks, and buckle all the car seats (four of them still needed help with this). And then a milder version of this tragedy would repeat itself just as it had for the last six months, except this time with more “spectators” to witness it and bear the brunt of the aural assault.

You see, I had taken only Nola in the car with me that day because the rest of the family needed a break from at least one source of toddler histrionics. The plan had worked beautifully for everyone who stayed home with my husband, Shaun, but backfired in a big way for me and Nola, since none of her brothers or sisters were present to distract her from her loathing for her car seat.

We were all well versed in misdirection after half a year of doing our best to keep the twinsies from shooting off like emotional rockets each time we all piled in the car to go to the gym or the grocery store or to church. Believe me: There were times I genuinely considered never leaving the house again. Nola’s identical twin sister, Evy, was usually right beside her, egged on by her twin’s rallying cries of dissent, matching her scream for scream. If Nola was the ringleader of this circus, Evy was her star performer.

As I walked inside, cradling Nola’s now limp, quiet form, one stark chorus beat a tattoo against my battered brain: “I hate this. This is hard. I hate this. This is so, so hard.”

It was not my finest mothering moment. But it was honest.

In that exact moment, I could see no point to this daily liturgy of meltdowns in the car. The girls were in a hard stage, and tantrums happened at home as well, but there was something especially crazy-making about the inability to face my girls, to hold their cheeks in my hands and breathe with them, to escape from the sheer inescapability of their shrieks for even a moment.

“Why, Lord,” I prayed, “would You put me through this kind of nonsense when it diminishes my capacity to mother my other kids well and takes so much mental energy to face each day?”

I had been repeating some version of this prayer for months—had prayed it

in the past during other trying seasons—and the Lord had always been gracious to answer me eventually. But this time, I barely made it through the mudroom door before I had my answer (not in an audible voice but just about): “What part of my death on the cross for your sins was easy? And yet, behold, what good has come of it.”

I froze, and Nola raised her head to gaze at me in concern as I stood, tears in my eyes now, contemplating this perspective that felt like both an old friend (because this was not my first rodeo with toddler tantrums) and a startling revelation.

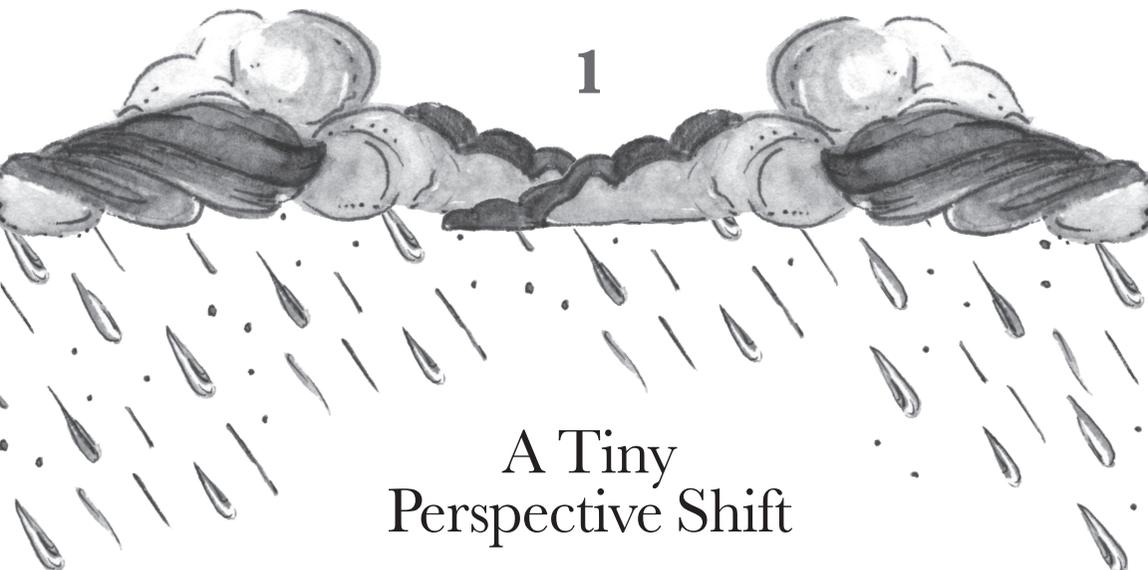
What if my twin girls’ seemingly meaningless melodramas were not a punishment but rather a mercy from the Lord? A daily opportunity to die to myself? To root out impatience and self-indulgence. To grow my capacity for both empathy and tenacity. To make me a more creative mama. And ultimately, to drive me to my knees at the foot of the hard, painful, bloody cross my Savior endured, not randomly or without purpose but for my ultimate benefit.

What if good could come from being dragged through the emotional wringer on the daily? What if, instead of despising the hard and kicking at it in contempt and disgust, I embraced it with open, if faltering, arms and leaned into its potential to transform my view of God and of His goodness in allowing me to walk a difficult path? What if I truly let myself believe that hard is not the same thing as bad?



*What if I truly let myself believe  
that hard is not the same thing as bad?*





## A Tiny Perspective Shift

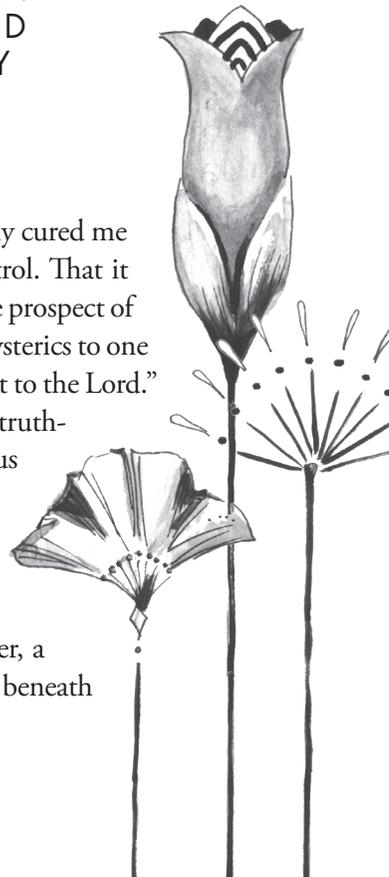
REAPING THE BENEFITS  
OF LOOKING AT HARD  
A WHOLE NEW WAY

I would love to tell you that my mudroom epiphany cured me of all impatience, selfishness, and desire for control. That it transformed me from a woman who cringed at the prospect of being trapped in the van for an hour with the twins' hysterics to one who drowned them out by joyfully belting out, "Shout to the Lord."

But I think we both know I'd be lying (although, truthfully, the older kids and I did quite a bit of boisterous hymn singing to distract the twins from their woes).

### A Life Preserver of Truth

What that moment in the mudroom did accomplish, however, was to furnish me with a life preserver, a simple truth to buoy me when I found myself slipping beneath



the choppy waters of another deafening car ride, followed by a forty-minute episode of two little girls acting as if eating my *delicious* (just ask their siblings) homemade spaghetti sauce was akin to my smashing their cute little toes one at a time with a hammer, followed by a fight to the death over pajamas—all while Shaun was gone on a work trip.

“Just because this is hard,” I reminded myself, “does not mean it’s bad. The Lord is doing a good work in me, and He’s going to complete it...eventually (Philippians 1:6). He’s upholding me with His righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10). I will reap a good harvest if I do not give up (Galatians 6:9).”

I’m not a mantra girl. More like a Scripture girl (see above). But sometimes just muttering, “Hard is not the same thing as bad,” under my breath was the tiny perspective shift that allowed me to view my girls’ synchronized fits not as a personal attack on my sanity but as a chance for professional motherhood development. I reminded myself that only the most elite athletes win the gold, and only the most dedicated soldiers earn the prestigious Medal of Honor.

## Victors, Not Victims

What both have in common is an intimate knowledge of the kind of hard that eats just about every other version of the concept for breakfast. It’s no accident that the Bible compares the whole of Christian life to both a race and a battle. Second Timothy 4:7 says, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” If that’s not “hard is not the same thing as bad” summed up in a single verse, I don’t know what is. Above all, this little phrase (and all the biblical truth that undergirds it) upended the narrative that I was a victim of my twins’ mood swings and car seat catastrophes.

A friend (we’ll call her Kim) once described her shock when her third child bucked everything she thought she knew about parenting. Her first two were compliant and sweet-natured. She was convinced she had aced her motherhood exam. However, her third, a daughter, ripped my friend’s Super Mom cape right off her shoulders, stomped on it, and then hacked it up with her mom’s best scissors just for good measure. Kim had assumed no child would do the things

I have  
fought  
the good  
fight,  
I have  
finished  
the  
race,  
I have  
kept  
the faith.



2TIMOTHY 4:7

her third born did—kicking, screaming, biting, throwing herself on the ground, intentionally hurting her siblings—unless she was taught to.

Not so.

“I learned so much about human depravity (that I hadn’t wanted to acknowledge) from both my daughter’s feral actions and my own angry reactions,” she said. Counselors told her to put her little girl on strong medication to sedate her wild behavior, and my friend begged her husband to let her put her daughter under the care of a professional who might be more successful in taming her ways.

He said no.

“I told him she was ruining the peace of my home, but God made it evident to me, over time, that it was not my out-of-control daughter who was wrecking our home’s peace. She was just being a sinful child. It was my rage-filled reactions, as the adult in the scenario, that were the main peace stealers. God was so gracious to teach me, through each battle royale with my girl, how desperately I needed Him and how much the victory belonged to Him, not me.”

Only when Kim acknowledged that she was not the victim of a four-year-old—not because of her exceptional parenting skills but because God was using her parenting weaknesses to teach her about *His* sufficiency—did she begin to see breakthroughs in her connection with her daughter. Eventually, she found herself thanking her Creator for blessing her with such a wild child to give her a fresher, humbler perspective on motherhood and the ways the hard things in it grow us and shape us in Christ’s image.

The best part? That little girl is now twenty years old, and she is one of the most delightful, tenderhearted, hardworking young women I have ever had the pleasure to meet. Her countenance is beautiful and serene, and her parents credit her with spiritual insight beyond her years. Kim actually told me, “I want to be like her when I grow up.” This sweet mama is so grateful the Lord kept her from buckling beneath the weight of those initial hard years and from listening to either the “professional” advice or her own desire for a calm, frictionless household.

## Only Jesus Is Enough

So much of my friend’s story resonated with me, with a few tweaks. If you’ve read my book *MIIs for Mama*, then you know that Ezra, our firstborn, took me

on a yearlong not-so-merry chase through the wilds of potty training that disabused me of any notion of superior parenting or perfect methods. So by the time Evy and Nola (who had been easy, cherubic babies) began their descent into the Tyranny of Toddlerhood, I doubted I was still harboring any delusions of mothering grandeur. I thought I could handle hard with the best of them, not because I was so great but because I had learned to be tough in Christ's strength. All you had to do was grit your teeth, hang on for the ride, and pray your way to the end of it.

What I hadn't accounted for was just how much more nerve-grating the results of an emotional breakdown were when you doubled the recipe. One headstrong child depletes you. Two suck you bone dry. Or so I told myself in the early stages of the girls' passionate struggles with, well, most things. There were times I was convinced their behavior would hollow me out, leaving behind a mere husk of my formerly resilient self.

Did you catch the last bit? *My* resilient self.

Clearly, I still had not mastered the art of leaning heavily on the staff of Christ's enoughness in times of stress. It was truly the Lord's reminding me of Jesus's response to hard—"Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2)—that shifted my eyes from all the teeth gritting, bootstrapping, and bullet praying to a higher goal.

Could I somehow fix my eyes on a future joy and endure my own small cross with anything like the equanimity of my Savior? Was something more than survival possible in this scenario?

In my own strength? No.

But as God began, day by day, to nudge my perspective further away from "making it" and nearer to a picture only He could provide of what my sweet, strong-willed twinsies (and I) could one day become, I felt the muscles of my back begin to uncoil for the first time in months.

If you're hoping for a Cinderella story of transformation at this point, I'm going to disappoint you. No amount of bibbidi-bobbidi-boo would have had any material effect on Evy and Nola's theatrical tendencies. In fact, so much of the time, their poofy Cinderella dresses were a significant contributor to the

problem, since nothing tipped them over the edge more quickly than having their beloved tulle skirts smooshed down by car seat buckles (nothing except being told to change out of said princess dresses in the first place, that is).

### The Slow Road to Sanity

But I had been injected with a fresh vision for our future, and I trusted from experience that the Lord would be faithful to fill in the inevitable gaps in my resolve and application. Over the next year (yep, you read that right), we worked with the twinsies daily to teach them how to manage their emotions (lots of redirection, rephrasing, disciplining, breathing, praying, and repetition), took practical steps to avoid certain triggers (you better believe I donated a fluffy skirt or four), and became even more creative with our misdirection techniques. We even created a mythical creature called a “pink and purple polka-dotted fuzzy-wiggle.” The older kids became professionals at “sighting” the elusive beasts at the most crucial moments of distraction from near meltdowns, and even though the twins quickly caught on to the joke, they still loved to crane their necks for a glimpse as part of the silly fun.



*I had been injected with a fresh vision for our future, and I trusted from experience that the Lord would be faithful to fill in the inevitable gaps in my resolve and application.*

Gradually, we saw improvement in the quality of our daily commute, but it wasn't until we were a few months away from their fourth birthday that I had the sudden blessed realization, driving in the car with all six kids on board, that no one was screaming. Praises be! For the first time in more days than I could begin to count, we had peacefully loaded the car, trekked down the driveway (the point when the first sputters of protest usually started), and driven to the gym.

Turning four was a tipping point toward maturity for the girls, and it was a good thing too, since I was six months pregnant with our seventh baby, Honor, and we were chin deep in the process of building our second DIY house from scratch. Twin toddler angst is stressful. Twin toddler angst plus pregnancy plus housebuilding is like saying “Here, hold my anvil” to a drowning woman.

Not only that, but we’d just begun a journey through the most traumatic friendship breakup we’ve ever experienced (more on that later).

### Refining and Restoring

Turns out asking the Lord to grow your capacity for hard is a bit like praying for patience: You might not like what He “puts you through” in answer to your prayer. Still, He was so gracious to bring us out of that season of intense highs and lows with the twinsies just as we entered a new season of challenges and heartbreaks. We see this principle of refining, then restoring (then refining again) in 1 Peter 5:10: “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.” I can look back now and see His impeccable timing in allowing what He did when He did, even if I couldn’t fathom the reasons in the midst of deeply painful moments of experiencing rejection in friendship.



*Turns out asking the Lord to grow your capacity for hard is a bit like praying for patience: You might not like what He “puts you through” in answer to your prayer.*

Neither could I have grasped just how far from those days of tantrums and tears the Lord would carry my twin girls. Since they are still just eleven, I have only been privileged to peek at the heights of greatness to which God will take

them, but if their personalities at the moment are any indication, it's going to be Mount Everest-level epic.

## A Glimmer of Hope

Evy and Nola are the glimmer of hope I love to offer all young mamas because their cheerfulness, sensitivity, gentleness with children, generosity, and adventurous palates *now* would have you imagining them as the kinds of toddlers who shared their toys with all and docilely ate whatever you put on their plates. (The truth is, for a while there, we chanted and cheered ourselves hoarse on a nightly basis to coax either girl into eating even a bite of dinner.)

I've had some compliant small children too, and, while the twinsies were no such specimens, I can see now how their finely (over)tuned emotional natures poised them to be the most empathetic of souls (once said natures had marinated in a God-given concoction of time and prayer and training, of course). I know this is what you're supposed to say, but I would truly change nothing about their hard toddler years, not only because they make me appreciate their fun, snuggly, sparkly personalities all the more now but also because their toddlerhood prepared me to be relatively unfazed by the more difficult stages of the siblings who followed them.

One of their younger brothers struggled with “rage monster” issues for almost two years. (I'll share some of how we helped him through that later.) Another regressed on potty training for months. Yet another alternated between losing his mind over every single step of bedtime or lunchtime or naptime or insert-any-word-you'd-like-time and displaying the kind of cheerful (and not-so-cheerful) obstinacy that looks you square in the face as you give him instructions and then does the complete opposite.

Did I love any of these phases? Did I do “spirit sprinkles” and shout, “Huz-zah, he's disobeying again”?

Of course not.

I'm a mother, not a character in an *SNL* skit.

Did I sometimes text my husband while he was traveling for work and wearily admit that I'd just said out loud to myself while doing laundry, “I don't like \_\_\_\_\_ very much right now”?

Yep. I'm only human.

But I'll tell you this: None of these phases tied me up in knots the same way Evy and Nola's double struggles did—for one very simple reason. When you've dealt with daily eruptions of Mount Twindom, getting blasted by only one little volcano feels a bit (if only a little bit) ho-hum. (This is not a knock on singleton mamas. I am one, and I will never deny that one strong-willed child is *hard*. But having twins tweaked the way I view my hard, and perspective shifts are kind of the point I'm making, after all.)

Even more, because of the protracted nature of the twins' high-strung phase, I'd had hundreds of back-to-back days to practice the art of allowing the Holy Spirit to grow me in the fruit of the Spirit. I had *so* far to go (still do), but praise God, He never leaves us exactly where He finds us!

### A Different Kind of “Gains”

As I navigated each new kind of “kid hard” the Lord placed in my path, I became aware I was flexing different, stronger, and more Christ-reliant spiritual muscles than I'd been using with the twinsies. On top of that, I genuinely wasn't as bothered by the hard. Sometimes I was even able to thank God for it in the moments it was happening! It was a real-life fleshing out of Colossians 2:6-7 (NASB): “Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.”

Even now, as I'm parenting another set of twin three-year-olds, the challenges, while present, don't produce the same anxiety as they did before.

That tiny perspective shift I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter has borne so much fruit in my life, my husband's life, and our family's life by extension. And it has been all the sweeter knowing it was Christ's work in me, not my own “toughness,” that made the change.

## DAD THOUGHT

Hi, Shaun here. When Abbie asked me if I would contribute to this book, I wasn't sure what I could tell a bunch of mamas about motherhood that wouldn't come across like a dog telling a cat how to purr. So I'm not going to do that. I'll leave the *purrfect* (sorry, this is a dad thought—I had to) mamahood encouragement to Abbie and will instead provide a father's insight on “hard is not the same thing as bad” in hopes of adding another layer of perspective that will help both mothers and fathers encourage each other to lean into the Lord when the going gets tough.

*Meow* on to my thoughts on that tiny perspective shift Abbie was talking about.

At first glance, it might not seem like dads would need as much encouragement to dig deep into the hard parts of parenting. After all, in a traditional breadwinner/homemaker breakdown, we're not usually the ones putting in as many hours with the kids as our wives. On top of that, in other areas we're supposed to be the stoic ones—the ones who take pride in conquering the highest peaks, surviving the harshest conditions, and subduing our greatest fears. “Hard”—at least in terms of feats—is practically what we crave and certainly what we measure each other against. How else could so many competitive survival shows succeed on cable television?

Yet when you switch from those individualistic “man versus cruel world” endeavors to the realm of daily consistency, relationship building, and service in marriage and fatherhood—well, let's just say *that* version of hard doesn't look nearly as appealing or rewarding.

After all, what man would ever want to watch husbands compete over diaper changing, bedtime stories, midnight feedings, and devotions with their kids?

Here, in the daily struggle, is where fathers most need the perspective shift, so they can see those often unheralded (yet invaluable) rewards that God has in store for those who honor Him in their family life. The good news? Dads are likely already predisposed to pursue physically hard things. We just need encouragement to channel that energy into the “small” tasks of parenthood where we can discover a hard that is truly worthy of pursuit.

## The Narrative

### THE WORLD'S RESPONSE TO HARD

Believes we are victims of the ways our kids “treat” us

Says that someone more patient would do this better

Is convinced that the longer the hard phase is, the worse it is

### A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO HARD

Believes that through Christ, we always have the choice to overcome

Is confident that God equips us with what we need when we need it

Knows that quick fixes rarely produce good character

## Action Steps

- Memorize and meditate on 2 Timothy 4:7: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”
- Write five sticky notes with “hard ≠ bad” on them and post them in high-traffic areas of your home as reminders of this tiny perspective shift.
- Pray about one friend who could help hold you accountable in changing the way you view the hard things in motherhood. Reach out when the Lord brings someone to mind.



## Questions



Do I view hard primarily as bad?

If so, am I getting this view from worldly culture or the Bible?

What is something hard in motherhood right now that the Lord is also using for good? And how?



## Prayer



*Lord, thank You that Jesus “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Hebrews 12:2), and, in the process, set the ultimate example of hard not being the same thing as bad. Help us to shift our mindsets from negativity to joy in You by Your strength.*