FOREWORD BY JORDAN LEE DOOLEY

THAT'S JUST NOT TRUE

How to Replace the Lies You Didn't Know You Believed with God's Unchanging Truth

Erica Ligenza Gwynn

"*That's Just Not True* is the anthem we've been desperately waiting for! An invitation to stop chasing all the lies that promise us MORE and show up honestly for the messy, muddy, beautiful life right in front of us. Erica's words—equal parts big-sister energy and the kind of hard-won warmth, wit, and wisdom that cannot be rushed—remind us that we have *good* work we were put here to do. And it has absolutely nothing to do with winning the world's approval. Honestly, I needed this book twenty years ago! The world is a better place because Erica is in it."

Mary Marantz, bestselling author of *Underestimated*
and host of *The Mary Marantz Show*

"Erica's writing feels like a conversation with a dear friend over coffee—warm, honest, and full of wisdom. With passion and hope, Erica confronts the lies we so often believe and points us back to God's unwavering faithfulness and goodness. This book is truly a gift to all who read it. If I had a daughter, I'd be reading this book with her!"

Tanner Olson, author, spoken-word poet, and speaker

"We live in a world that constantly feeds us lies—about our worth, our purpose, and even our faith. Without realizing it, we start believing these falsehoods, shaping our lives around them, and feeling trapped by fear, insecurity, and doubt. But *That's Just Not True* is the book we need right now. Erica powerfully uncovers the lies we've unknowingly embraced and replaces them with the unshakable truth of God's Word. This book is a breath of fresh air, full of wisdom, encouragement, and freedom. If you've ever wrestled with feeling 'not enough' or wondered if you'll ever break free from the weight of deception, this book will be your guide to lasting transformation. I can't recommend it enough!"

Hope Reagan Harris, author, podcast host, and founder
of the Purpose Doesn't Pause movement

"What a breath of fresh air! By the end of page one, Erica has already become a deeply relatable, wise, and trusted friend. She takes you by the hand, and while making you laugh (and tear up a little), she systematically frees you from unhelpful platitudes, half-truths, and flat-out lies that have kept you stuck for years."

Stephanie May Wilson, author of *Create a Life You Love*
and host of the *Girls Night* podcast

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"Reading *That's Just Not True* feels like sitting down with your wisest, wittiest best friend, who also happens to know exactly what lies you're still believing—and how to help you finally break up with them. Erica's words are both a mirror and a megaphone: reflective, affirming, and powerfully loud in all the right ways. This book is a pep talk for the woman who's tired of shrinking and ready to step into truth—with sass, strength, and a whole lot of joy!"

Rachel Awtrey, author of *Love Your Life (Even When You Don't Like It All the Time)* and podcast host of *Real Talk with Rachel Awtrey*

"As you read *That's Just Not True*, you'll envision Erica pulling out a chair, patting the cushion, sliding a chocolate croissant your way, and inviting you into some real talk (with plenty of laughs and a few tissues thrown in). A witty and engaging writer, Erica isn't just telling us what to do—she's the real deal. She's lived this book out and longs for other women to experience the freedom she's finding. I wish I had read this book in my twenties! I'm grabbing copies for my young adult daughters, as well as suggesting it to the young singles and mamas in my Bible study. I highly recommend *That's Just Not True* to anyone who's sick of believing the lies and longs to step into freedom and abundance."

Laura L. Smith, speaker, podcaster, and author of fifteen books, including *Brave Woman, Mighty God* and *The Urgency of Slowing Down*

"With wisdom, wit, and a refreshingly real voice, Erica speaks directly to the lies so many of us have absorbed without even realizing it. This book is for every person who's ever felt exhausted by the pressure to be enough, do enough, or hold it all together, and it will serve as a lifeline for anyone who's tired of trying to be everything and ready to live anchored in what's actually true."

Ian Simkins, lead pastor at The Bridge Church

"With so much noise and confusion in our world, we could all use help identifying the lies we have internalized (some without even knowing it!) and redirecting our focus to the truth of the gospel. Erica does exactly this with both approachability and humor. If you are walking through a challenging season, or perhaps just wondering why life isn't working out the way you thought it would, this book will gently walk you back into the life-giving truth that sets us free."

Whitney Lowe, author and founder of Scribble Devos

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Erica Ligenza Gwynn

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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For Mimi and Olivia—my before and after.
May you always be free.

And for all daughters of Eve.
Turns out, there's a great return policy
on what the enemy sold us.
Let's go make an exchange—
grab a coffee on the way?

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Foreword

I don't know about you, but I grew up as a pretty goal-oriented, go-getter type of gal. And in many cases, that served me well. Most of the time, if I set a goal, I would find a way to achieve it.

I ate up so many of the messages the world threw my way—"You are enough," "God won't give you more than you can handle," "You can do anything," and so on and so forth—and subconsciously began to believe if I just worked hard enough and did all the right things, life would go my way. I had no idea how many sound bites and half-truths I had bought into until they began to fail me . . . until, in spite of my best efforts, my plans started to go sideways.

This specifically happened for me when it came to trying to grow my family.

I had checked all the boxes: I went to college, got a good degree, married a good Christian man, spent a few years working to get financially stable, lived a relatively healthy life in the ways I knew how, and bought a house. The natural next step was to have a baby. And I thought that because I felt ready and wanted a baby, it would just happen. Until it didn't.

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Recurrent miscarriages, a bout of infertility, and then another miscarriage of what I thought was a miracle pregnancy absolutely derailed me. What happened to my perfectly laid plans? What happened to having it all if you just do the right things and work hard enough?

Meanwhile, everyone around me seemed to be having babies.

I worried that if I did something to mess up my life or if I didn't see a certain doctor by a certain time or missed a cycle of "trying" for a baby, it would mess up the plan. (Spoiler: We are not powerful enough to mess up God's plan for our life.)

Suddenly I found myself questioning whether I was enough, confused about why I couldn't do the one thing I thought my body was designed to do (have a baby), angry that it was happening easily for (seemingly) everyone else, and doubting God's goodness because he was *definitely* giving me more than I could handle.

For the first time, I began to consider: Have I been believing lies?

Perhaps, in spite of working hard and striving for excellence, I'm not enough—at least not on my own. Maybe God *will indeed* give me more than I can handle so that I learn to rely on him and not myself. I learned the hard way that I might not be able to do anything just because I decide I want it or make it a goal (and having a baby isn't something to achieve; it's a gift to receive).

That season of waiting and disappointment after disappointment forced me to unlearn so many half-truths I'd been believing and return to *the* truth of who God is and who he says I am. Feel-good sound bites (often even shared in the church) coupled with my best efforts and "perfect plans" won't always lead to the outcome I have in mind because, try as I may, I'm not the author of my life. God is. Whether I like it or not, I am more dependent on his sovereignty than I realized. And the same is true for you.

Maybe you can relate to my story, or perhaps you've experienced something you had in mind go utterly sideways. Maybe

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life has been cruising along relatively fine, and you don't even realize what you're believing isn't totally true.

Regardless of where you are in your journey, there's one thing we likely have in common: We are a generation of women who have been fed so many lies and half-truths (and possibly even passed them on to our kids, intentionally or unintentionally). And sometimes it's not until one or several of those lies seem to fail us, or when someone helps us sift through the noise swirling around in our brains, that we can experience the freedom of leaning into what God, the Author of Truth, says is true.

And that's exactly what Erica helps us do in this book. Erica has a gift for gently peeling back the layers of lies we've been taught to live by while pointing us back to Scripture and Truth. Her words feel like a trusted friend reminding you of who you are—and more importantly, who God is. If you're anything like me and have even subconsciously believed things like . . .

"God won't ever give me more than I can handle—he gives his hardest battles to his strongest soldiers!"

"I messed it all up and missed my shot."

"I can do whatever I set my mind to! I can manifest my dream life!"

"It's happening for everyone but me. My life should look different."

"I'll be happy when I get *this* or go *there* or do *that*."

"If I'm not hustling, I'm lazy—I don't have time to rest."

. . . get comfortable. Grab a snack. And buckle up.

Erica is going to meet you right where you are with a warm hug (and maybe a little kick in the pants) and help you rediscover how to hear God's voice in a world full of noise.

Jordan Lee Dooley, bestselling author of *Own Your Everyday* and *Embrace Your Almost*

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Introduction

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

John 8:32

Let's play two truths and a lie. You know the one? It's a fun little get-to-know-you conversation starter used by many a camp counselor to break ice between teenagers in July. I'll raise my hand and go first here, new friend . . .

1. I've never broken a bone.
2. I fainted in a maximum-security prison.
3. I ran into a tree during a 5K.

At this point I sound like a walking (or running) liability. But back to the game. You probably already know that the best players blur the lines beautifully and believably, specifically and salaciously. None of this *"I have three cats" when really I have two* nonsense—we're getting creative and going all the way here, folks.

Did she really hit a tree? Or maybe she's never broken a bone . . . but then again, there's no WAY she actually fainted in a maximum-security

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prison, right? WRONG. Good friend, all of the above are true for yours truly.

Let's play again.

1. I scuba dove with sharks in the Bahamas on my honeymoon.
2. Taylor Swift is from my hometown, and I met her before she hit it big!
3. I know how to whistle (and can sound like a bird).

So where's the lie? *Did she scuba with sharks in the Bahamas? Or maybe she met T. Swift before she became famous since they're from the same town . . . but she also MUST know how to whistle, right?* WRONG AGAIN.

They're all lies.

* * *

Without knowing a story's context or its creator's character, it can be near impossible to tell fact from fiction. And all it takes is one twist—one word, one idea, one notion twisted—to change the story entirely. When a Prince of Lies is running rampant in a world wrapped in sin, what's bad may look good and what's wrong may seem right. Without a rock-solid armor of Truth, even the strongest soul can be made none the wiser.

A half-truth is still a whole lie—and that's what the devil does. He plays in the middle ground, twisting and turning what *is* good into something less than. What's worse—it probably looks or feels good at first glance. Heck, there may be *actual* good sprinkled somewhere in the middle, making matters more confusing and frustrating to figure out.

So . . . how many lies are you believing about *yourself* without trusting the context of your story or the character of your Creator?

Have you ever felt like if you're not hustling, you're lazy? Or maybe if you're interested in lots of things, it means you're not

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focused or talented enough at one? Have you ever felt like no matter what you do or how hard you try . . . it's just never enough? Or like you'll finally feel happy, successful, or peaceful when you just get the promotion or the pretty house or the positive pregnancy test?

Lies.

The lies surround us. They're on our TVs and TikToks, in our brains, and in our hearts. At this point, they're everywhere, and it can feel suffocatingly inescapable and overwhelmingly difficult to navigate.

I'm tired. Are you tired?

I know you are. Because it's hard. And it's hard because you care. The truth *matters* to you. Doing your best, stewarding your gifts, and finding your purpose matter to you.

You're not here to skim the surface of your own life—you're here to live out loud. You're here to make an impact, create something magical, and do something meaningful with this one beautiful, glorious gift of a life that God has so graciously given you. You're a kingdom-minded warrior—and sis, the battle has already begun.

But so many of us are running on obsolete operating systems, not even aware of the opportunity to upgrade. So many of us are running playback loops from morning 'til night that tell us we're too much *this* or not enough *that*. You've heard the same stories in your brain—maybe even told to you by someone you cared about deeply—that have said you messed it all up or already missed your shot. Maybe you've been downplayed as "just" a mom or told that a project you care so much about is "just" a silly hobby.

Or maybe you've opened the other can of worms. You've fallen for what society says—that you can totally have it all. That you're in control. That you can manifest your dream life.

Therein lies our lifelong challenge: discerning fact from fiction. In the midst of the lies, there is truth. In the midst of the pain, there is peace. In the midst of the hard, there is happy.

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Somewhere in the depths of my mental archives, squished between the smell of strawberry Lip Smackers and Sweet Pea body spray, I've got a core memory of belting "This One's for the Girls" into my hairbrush. You know the one—the early 2000s smash hit from the classic 2003 album *Martina*, which I proudly blasted from my navy-blue boom box. (Is my millennial showing yet?)

This one's for the girls who've ever felt like too much.

They said you laughed too loudly—that your light shined too brightly. You were the girl in lipstick and heels, surrounded by a sea of sweatpants. You probably had a poster on your bedroom wall that said "Be a flamingo in a flock of pigeons" and lived by the mantra "Never let anyone dull your sparkle."

This one's for the girls who've ever felt like never enough.

You were the "try hard" who still got rejected. You could be the best friend to all and still never "make it" into the group. You drank the "never give up" Kool-Aid, but you sometimes feel like you need something stronger to endure still having nothing to show for it. Life feels like one big hamster wheel, and you're running and you're running and you're . . . tired of still running.

This one's for the girls who used to wish upon a star.

You dreamed big, but real life came in bigger, and you feel like you got the short end of the stick with a second-rate version of the vision you once had—because it sure doesn't look like your Pinterest board anymore.

This one's for the girls who've been balancing all the balls.

You're a multitasking queen—a real chaos coordinator—building a home *and* a business, raising babies *and* raising heck for causes you care about, for girlfriends in need, for family you love. You do it all, and yet it somehow feels like something is always coming up short, and your head hits the pillow with a running list of reminders and to-dos for tomorrow. Even then, something is missing—there's a little hole where satisfaction should be.

This one's for the girls who've ever felt like they can't catch a break.

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It feels messy. *You* feel messy. And not even a hot mess—just a mess. Forget swimming through life; treading water is tough, and lately it's felt like your head is barely above the surface. Man, what you'd do for a lifeboat . . . even a life vest? At this point, we'll settle for Rose's floating door. Anybody?

This one's for the girls in the waiting room.

You didn't expect to be here—to still be here—yet here you are. Watching, waiting, as every name around you is called. Will it ever be your time? Have you been forgotten? Do you keep waiting? Do you say, "screw this, already," and leave altogether? This not getting called can't possibly be your calling.

This one's for the girls who are straight-up pooped.

While your kindred spirit was once the Energizer Bunny, your human is showing—and you just can't keep going anymore. Your batteries are drained, they don't feel rechargeable, and you're probably out of triple-A's (again). Your white flag is up—you're tired of being tired.

It's so heavy, sis. Can I help you lighten your load?

To quote the great Elle Woods, "I feel comfortable using legal jargon in everyday life."[1] So, dear friend, I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

I won't give you more to-dos for your never-ending list.

I won't just tell you what you want to hear.

I won't have any "holier than thou" sermons—because I'm right there in the weeds with you. I don't have a secret sauce or magical bean to make it better or make it happen—and if anyone says they do, they're lying (and we're breaking free from that, remember?).

I *can* tell you one of the biggest things I learned as a recovering perfectionist: We're not here to win a gold star. Your life isn't a problem to solve or a riddle to figure out. There is no finish line besides the end—like, *the end* the end. Here's what I do know: The "truths" of this world—the ones taught in fancy philosophy seminars or the ones slapped on Facebook

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statuses—will mean nothing if they don't align with *the* capital-T Truth.

The way, the truth, and the life.

Sometimes the truth hurts. Sometimes the truth is hard. But the truth will always set us free (John 8:32).

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"God Won't Ever Give Me More Than I Can Handle"

> God will always give you more than you can personally bear on your own. But it will never be more than He can bear. This way, you can learn that your strength is found in Jesus Christ and not in yourself.
>
> —Adam Houge

When I was about thirty weeks pregnant with my daughter, Olivia, I was hospitalized because of a "small baby and crappy placenta," per the astutely medically accurate description by my doctor. It was my first pregnancy, and really, I had never thought of myself as the mothering type. Some little girls dream of being a mommy—I aspired to be on *American Idol* or training dolphins at SeaWorld. The first diaper I ever changed was Olivia's, so it's safe to say I was pretty green at this whole motherhood thing. But I wasn't too green to get that the unfolding scenario was no

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bueno. Now, my diagnosing doctor at the time wasn't instilling great confidence—he was a heavy smoker, overweight, an amateur geologist, and moonlighting a fireworks business in between OB-GYN shifts. (I kid you not, the guy got around.)

So when he showed concern at baby's size in utero, I was trying to read between the lines to gauge the severity or intensity of whatever was happening next. Things were pointing toward the problematic, but the eventual decision—after fetal monitoring, an ultrasound, etc.—was to go home, book all of these tests again for every week thereafter, and be prepared just in case things changed quickly (which they can—and do). We were told that if or when something looked odd during any of these twice-a-week tests, it could mean needing to go into labor, like, right then.

The goal was to make it to at least the thirty-five-week ultrasound to reevaluate, with two to three weekly tests and the constant possibility for anything changing before then.

I already felt zero percent prepared to have a baby. There was no Pinterest-perfect nursery setup, no packed hospital bag, and no confidence in my ability to birth a human being (not sure how much the birthing classes would've helped, but we hadn't crossed that off our checklist yet either). "Premature baby at any moment" sure wasn't on my first-baby bingo card. So we took the weekend, rallied the troops, and Amazon Primed like no tomorrow.

On Tuesday morning, we split up in separate cars to go in for my 8:00 a.m. fetal monitoring nonstress test. As we were leaving the house, I started to feel a bit woozy and mentioned to my husband, Jamie, "Babe, I feel like I'm blacking out a little bit." Granted, it was not the best choice to still get behind a wheel, but the hospital was five minutes away, and I wasn't actually blacking out—I just felt off and lightheaded. (Still, do as I say and not as I did—don't drive yourself in a similar state, thank you kindly).

Have you ever been at an appointment where you just *know* you're about to hear bad news? It starts with a look or a too-pregnant pause, and someone who "isn't allowed" to tell you

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more tells you all you need to know with avoidant eye contact and a "Let me get the doctor."

I waited forty-five minutes alone in that ultrasound room while the technician and hospitalist conferred outside the door before the maternal fetal medicine doctor came in to break the news: I had severe preeclampsia.

He looked at me with such empathy—as if he was a seasoned pro at telling women they or their baby may not make it to tomorrow. "Erica, you're sicker than you feel. You're at extremely high risk right now of a stroke, a seizure, or both. And at this point, we're more concerned about your health than the baby's. If we wait, the baby might be okay . . . but you might not be."

That morning's blood work came back showing declining liver and kidney function, falling platelet count, dropping red blood cell count . . . and my blood pressure measured 181/122. I was in hypertensive crisis, en route to a stroke.

"We need to deliver the baby."

I, now in shell shock, grasping for *any* semblance of control in the situation, asked, "Deliver, like . . . can we do tomorrow?" Yes, Erica, as if this is a conference call to get on the calendar. Mark me down for 10:00 a.m.

"Unfortunately, no—we need to deliver today. Like, as soon as an operating room opens."

I didn't know how to think or what to feel. I just knew that people weren't supposed to have babies at thirty-two weeks pregnant. Babies aren't ready to be in the world at thirty-two weeks, and mommies aren't ready to be mommies at thirty-two weeks.

Once our most important people knew the news and pressed pause on their lives to pivot toward ours, urgent preparations began.

Nurses began a high-dose IV drip of magnesium sulfate for the next twenty-four-plus hours to prevent a seizure. While we waited for my parents to make it to the hospital, my retired aunt-slash-godmother was able to pull a "drop everything and drive";

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before retirement, she was a nurse practitioner well-versed in the side effects of magnesium sulfate. As it started kicking in, she sat next to me praying—a bedside blessing.

Meanwhile, everyone kept sympathetically saying, "You're going to be on magnesium sulfate . . ." as if I was about to go on a date with Darth Vader.

I wish it had been Darth Vader . . . turns out this medicine is more like going on a date with the entire Sith Empire. Magnesium sulfate feels like getting hit by a bus and then being soaked in a poison from something out of a Marvel comic book. My best friend had been on it too and likened it to chemo treatments from when she battled (and beat!) cancer. On top of that, I wasn't allowed to eat, I couldn't sleep, and it was nearly impossible to physically open my eyes. I lost all strength, could barely speak, and was hooked up to every IV and monitor under the sun. And speaking of the sun, I felt like I was being cooked from the inside out.

It felt like being on the edge of a hellish limbo, waiting to pass through to the other side—like straddling earth and something beyond, with awareness of both but no real grasp of either.

I'd been told that God wouldn't give me more than I could handle.

But he did.

I didn't handle this alone, and I couldn't have. Alone, I would've died. I would've died, and my daughter probably would have too. Everything was a foggy blur. And I remember feeling completely helpless, like my brain was inhabiting a body I couldn't control and I was at the total mercy of the revolving door of nurses adding this or adjusting that to keep me stable and conscious. (Nurses are just the best. Bless them.)

At 2:34 p.m. on October 17, 2018, Olivia Grace was born via emergency C-section. She weighed 3 pounds, 0.1 ounce, and she looked like a little alien as they whisked her off to the NICU. I couldn't see her, I couldn't hold her, I couldn't feed her.

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This was more than I could handle. Really, I wasn't "handling" anything—I was barely surviving.

There Will Be Suffering in a Fallen World

God is not in the business of keeping us comfortable.

While "God won't give you more than you can handle" is often said as a means of encouragement and affirmation, the phrase can feel so discouraging when we feel disconnected from it—when we find ourselves in uncharted waters without a map or a lifeboat. What's worse, we risk shaming ourselves in those lonely places where our internal experience feels so far from others' external and well-intentioned comments. Our inner dialogue can shift to sound like *Come on, girl, you should be able to handle this! You should be stronger than this! You should not be so upset by this!* And suddenly, you're shaming and shoulding all over yourself—like you're standing alone, on a stage and under a spotlight, unable to see the One waiting in the wings to hold your hand and heart through the scene.

GOD IS NOT IN THE BUSINESS OF KEEPING US COMFORTABLE.

Alternatively, this saying is used at the wrong time, implying the wrong thing—as if God "gave" a child leukemia or killed somebody's grandma.

Let's be very clear: Horrible things happen. But horrible things happen not because there's a vindictive, merciless supreme being in the sky handing out hardships like hard candies from the office bowl.

Horrible things happen because we are broken people with free will in a fallen world. Full stop.

Tragedies aside, we're likely also familiar with feeling like we've been unexpectedly thrown in the deep end on a Tuesday—like life is going grand until it isn't, and what once felt swimmable suddenly threatens to pull you under.

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"God won't ever give you more than you can handle."

It's safe, it's comforting, it's self-affirming.

It's also a lie.

And we believe that lie because we've convinced ourselves the Bible says it.

The Lie Beneath the Lie

Whoop, there it is! Did you, like me, grow up thinking this just *must* be in the Bible because enough people said it was? Guilty as charged. The thing is, God isn't a helicopter parent. He's not in the business of preventing all problems—he's in the business of creating possibilities out of them. God never said, "Thou shalt never hit a limit in this life." He hasn't rubber-stamped our ticket to pass Go through navigable waters and calm seas. There is no yellow brick road to Oz—no easy-street shortcut en route to the pearly gates.

On the contrary, we're promised the opposite—we're told straight up that in this life we'll suffer (John 16:33). But our suffering can be sanctifying—a beautiful invitation to bring the light of Christ into our darkest places so that in communion *with* him, we can handle our hardest hurdles and stretch into new versions of ourselves that are unlimited and unfazed by earthly challenges.

We can step forward in faith, on unlit paths and in uncertain times, confident that it's the Lord who goes before us. He will be with us; he will not leave us or forsake us (Deut. 31:8). Our confidence can't come from a sense of personal competence or capability, or we'll likely fall short at life's most difficult doors. Our confidence *can* come in knowing that no matter what's waiting on the other side, One who is greater will strengthen us, help us, and uphold us through it all (Isa. 41:10).

According to "God won't ever give you more than you can handle," we work, live, and breathe within the confines of ourselves.

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But according to our God—who made the grandest mountains majestically, designed the tiniest snowflakes uniquely, and claimed you as his own confidently—we were made for such a time as this (Esther 4:14).

Will we encounter challenges? Undoubtedly.

Will we already have the wherewithal, the know-how, or the savvy to overcome them all? Unlikely.

But do we have access to the source of all goodness, kindness, and mightiness at all times? Unlimitedly.

The during can still be daunting.

But the ending can now be freeing. You can release the pressure to get it right from the get-go—nix the expectation to "handle it" yourself—and sit in surrender, knowing you are in peaceful partnership with the Creator of the entire universe.

You may not "got it." But guess what? He sure does.

God will absolutely give you more than you can handle.

God will never give you more than *he* can handle.

Sometimes God handles it through his people—our people. He uses us, if we're willing to be used, to do his work here on earth. For me, then, that looked like my aunt praying with me. It looked like our dear friends delivering takeout to our hospital room for my husband. It looked like my mom activating a chain of prayer warriors and going to battle when I couldn't even speak, let alone fight.

SOMETIMES GOD GIVES US MORE—WAY MORE—THAN WE CAN REALISTICALLY, HUMANLY HANDLE BECAUSE HE NEEDS US TO LIFT OUR HANDS TO HIM AND SAY, "FATHER, *HELP ME*."

And sometimes God gives us more—way more—than we can realistically, humanly handle because he needs us to lift our hands to him and say, "Father, *help me*." It's an open invitation for a heavenly handout—an opportunity to witness divinity as we surrender our reality to the One who supernaturally surpasses it all.

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Had someone told me Olivia's birth story in advance, I wouldn't have believed I could handle any of it—the stress, the pain, the grief. The anxiety of not having answers, the physical toll of being on the brink of seizure and stroke while also experiencing childbirth, the grief of losing a romanticized delivery and needing a rewrite in real time with the ending TBD.

That was more than I could handle.

And I definitely wouldn't have believed it was only the beginning of the story.

When We Can't Handle It, He Can

Going home from the hospital without your baby changes you. Being a NICU parent changes you, whether you're there for a few hours or a few days. For us, it was a few months—seventy-three days, to be exact—that our girl was hospitalized.

After the first few days, we felt almost adjusted to our new normal. We didn't know any different. It sucked. But we were handling it.

Near the one-month mark, on day twenty-eight, the lead neonatologist—a brash Russian immigrant with a hard reputation and a soft spot for our case—sat down next to me as I pumped milk for Liv's refrigerated stash.

She had news.

They had found a very strange bacteria in Olivia's blood work—it was a five-alarm NICU fire. They could handle the bradycardia events she had been having up to that point (when a baby's heart rate and oxygen levels go down dangerously low). With this new discovery and bigger question marks, they could no longer manage her case at this hospital. She required immediate hospital transfer—where would I like her to go?

Nurses were running—actually running—into the NICU.

Tears were streaming down my cheeks, milk was flowing through my pump, fears were flying through my brain as I sat

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in the corner of the room, fighting to find an ounce of motherly confidence in a role I felt sorely unequipped to hold.

This is more than I can handle.

I couldn't handle that decision—I knew nothing.

But this doctor knew something.

So I trusted her medical wisdom and went with her recommendation—one of the best children's hospitals in the country, with the highest-level NICU. Their transport team was already en route. When they arrived, it was like a scene straight out of *Grey's Anatomy*—a frenzied-but-focused team speaking a coded language as they moved and prepared and handled in sync.

They boxed up little Liv in a heated Isolette and plugged in her monitors so that she'd be tracked along the way. I rode in the front seat of the ambulance while Jamie followed in our car—a ride that we'd know all too well in the coming months can take an hour on a good day, two hours on a bad.

It was more than we could handle.

We got lucky—there were one hundred beds in this hospital's NICU (compared to the four in our home hospital). Before arriving, they weren't sure there would be an open bed for Olivia. We arrived and got Bed #96.

From there, the team started testing and talking. And test after test came back negative.

The team was stumped.

Let me tell you: It does not feel good when one of the best children's hospitals on the planet cannot figure out what's wrong with your baby.

IV fluids, two broad-spectrum antibiotics, and two blood transfusions later, she no longer looked like she was on death's doorstep—but they still had no idea what the mystery infection or virus was that was keeping her sick.

This is more than we can handle.

Each day brought new challenges and new questions with no answers.

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When could we go home?

With every step forward came two steps back—or so it seemed. No answers, no consistencies, no guarantees.

And the feelings—so many feelings. I took notes, day by day, with each passing moment or milestone missed in the NICU. I'm sure every experience is different, just like every baby and diagnosis is different. And I'm sure some mamas have it better, and some mamas have it worse—just like some babies have it better or worse. And it's not at all predictable, nor is it particularly fun—it's just a phase.

But this phase hit me hard.

I tried so hard to stay as positive as possible, but I'd be straight-up lying if I said it was easy or that I was always full of hope or faith. I was shaky at best. Not to mention, I had postpartum depression, undoubtedly worsened by a generally depressing everything.

When the number-one question asked during this time was "How are you holding up?" as a new mom without her baby and no end in sight—that's a hard question to answer.

Someone else gives your baby her first bath. "She loved it!" they say.

Someone else rocks your baby at night when she's upset.

You walk into the room to someone else snuggling your baby, saying, "Oh, she just loves to snuggle!"

You walk into the room to someone else holding your baby, saying, "Wash your hands first!" before they'll hand her to you.

You watch your baby from home on a video camera. You see when she cries, and you count the seconds it takes for anyone to come to her aid.

And you're mad at God. That's the worst thing to admit. You don't *want* to be angry at God. You don't feel like you *should* be angry at God. He blessed you with the most beautiful baby girl—how can you be angry? But you're still angry about how the journey of events has gone. You're trying to find purpose or meaning

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in this torturous waiting game. And while you thought you could at first, you're losing sight of that lately amid the anguish of just wanting your baby to come home.

This is more than I can handle.

There's an old proverb that says, "Do not blame God for having created the tiger but thank him for not having given it wings."

Our tiger did not have wings. For as much as it sucked, it could've been worse. Which is not at all to minimize or invalidate the pain we felt—because, boy, was there pain—but to recognize the hope we maintained that the tiger could be tamed.

We had tried to teach ourselves not to get our hopes up anymore. With four almost-discharges and counting, hope was hurting more than helping sometimes.

Halloween came and went, Thanksgiving came and went, Christmas came and went—all in the NICU.

And as much as we wanted the "Christmas miracle" of Olivia being home, we didn't get that. *But.* Maybe we got a different kind of Christmas miracle. Because at 7:00 p.m. on that Christmas Eve, Olivia had her last bradycardia event. I like to think this miracle was even more meaningful because it was on that night that Jesus came into the world as a human. It felt like God saying, "I have come. I am here. It's not going to be easy, but it's going to be okay."

After five "event-free" days, Olivia could come home; on December 29, we were discharged in time for the New Year. Still with a feeding tube and not without complications—but home.

It was more than we could handle. But it wasn't too much for him.

You can have full faith that God's got it and still totally lose it. You can know in the pit of your soul that he's working things for your good and still feel really, really bad. You can simultaneously feel despair in the unknowns and question marks, grief in the face of closed doors, and relief knowing it's not all on you to figure out what's next.

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This idea that you won't ever be overwhelmed or overloaded to the point of self-destruction—that you won't be given more than you can take—is just not true. Many of us have seen it; some of us have felt it. And if you've felt it, you certainly aren't alone. If anything, you're in good company.

As Moses led the Israelites away from the pharaoh's chasing army of over six hundred chariots, he arrived at the shore of the Red Sea. Now, I'd imagine if we were to see this scene play out in modern times, he'd look around and think, *Well, I guess this is the end*. (Alternatively, a four-letter-word that my publisher won't print—but our hypothetical modern-day Moses wouldn't be above it.)

YOU CAN SIMULTANEOUSLY FEEL DESPAIR IN THE UNKNOWNS AND QUESTION MARKS, GRIEF IN THE FACE OF CLOSED DOORS, AND RELIEF KNOWING IT'S NOT ALL ON YOU TO FIGURE OUT WHAT'S NEXT.

Just me?

Instead, we see Moses say to the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today" (Exod. 14:13 NKJV). (Notice he didn't say, "I've got this; I'll handle it." Au contraire, he gave all glory to God from the get-go. We love to see it, Moses.)

And with that, God commands Moses to lift his rod over the waters, and the Red Sea is parted so that the Israelite people can cross on dry ground, escaping the Egyptians. And then, just when things get exciting, when the Egyptians try following the dry route through the sea, God handles it again, bringing the waters down and flooding them away so that "not so much as one of them remained" (v. 28 NKJV).

Beyond Moses, we see earthly, human limits show up multiple times in Scripture. David in the face of Goliath, Mary in the face of the angel Gabriel—even Jesus' own disciples whom he asked to feed a crowd of five thousand who had gathered to hear him teach, when they only had five loaves and two fish.

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They were all given more than they could handle.

But none of these events were ever more than God could handle. God made a way when there was none.

Nothing in the Bible says God won't give you more than you can handle.

Instead, we see this in 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has come upon you except what is common to humanity. But God is faithful; he will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to bear it" (CSB).

When we're at the end of our rope, when we're at the bottom of our cup, when we're at the lowest of lows—God does not look at us expectantly or critically to see how we're going to handle our challenges. He looks at us lovingly and mercifully, inviting us to look up and cry for a way out from our Father who would and could, quite literally, do anything for us.

Maybe today it doesn't look like seas parting—although I'm sure the Jersey Shore splitting in two would make for quite the viral video.

Maybe today it's not a nine-foot-tall fighter being knocked down by a slingshot or food miraculously multiplying to feed the masses.

But the same God who led Moses and equipped David and fed many is also our God. If he did it for them, he can do it for you.

His provision might look different, but it's still his hand at play. The girlfriend who shows up at your doorstep when you are in crisis. The driver who pulls over to help you on the highway. The barista whose kindness keeps you going on a day you think you are done.

And at risk of sounding too much like Debbie Downer here . . . it's not just in the pits of despair where we may find ourselves thinking, *Man, this is just more than I can take*.

Sometimes the mountain peaks ahead—the absolute highs of our journeys—may feel bigger than we can handle too. But

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you know what? Things are *supposed* to feel bigger than us. Our dreams, our goals, our ambitions are allowed to be sky-high—really, they're heaven-high. They're so high up there that only God can step in to help us make them happen. It's not on us to do it all—it's on us to believe that he who *can* do it all *will* do a great work in us (Phil. 1:6). Pray for the wrong doors to slam shut and the right doors to open easily. In a world that tells us to look for windows, let us be graced with wisdom to know when it's simply not our house.

In some of my lowest lows through Olivia's birth and NICU stay, the feelings of isolation and desperation were numbing, depressing, heartbreaking, suffocating. But in letting others—family, friends, doctors, nurses, therapists, counselors—help me handle the hard, it made the hard just a bit easier to bear.

In this life, you will be given things you actually can't handle.

You will feel overwhelmed, discouraged—maybe even completely desperate and desolate.

But you will never have to handle them alone.

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