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## CHAPTER ONE

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# The Missional Mom Embraces the Call of Her Missional God

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*God's call is often demanding.  
It will require sacrifice of some kind,  
and possibly some hardship.  
But it will result in meaning and purpose.  
You can be sure of that.*

OS GUINNESS

*I confess* I always had a hankering for musically gifted men. I fell for my future husband when I attended his junior-year recital in college and heard him thunder away at the Brahms Piano Sonata No. 3 with both precision and flair. Fast-forward fifteen

years and three kids, and you can probably picture the environment in our house of music lovers. Our boys have been surrounded since before birth by the sounds of everything from Liszt to Motown to Van Halen. And now our kids are at an age to make their own music as budding instrumentalists. One day I was trying to help one of our sons with his new violin piece, a short concerto by Arcangelo Corelli. For the first time, his part was more of a supportive role and did not carry the main melody line. Having been used to a long list of easily hummable children's Suzuki songs, my son was stymied by this piece with no easily recognizable melody. He tried in vain to practice, but I could tell his interest was flagging and his frustration was mounting as he repeatedly fumed, "I just don't get it!"

Thankfully, we had the DVD of his violin school's previous year's concert, and together we watched a performance of the piece he was struggling with. I could see, almost instantly, the difference hearing the whole concerto made. When my son heard the entire song and saw the groups of children playing their distinct parts, some of which he hadn't even known existed, he was able to understand how his particular part fit with theirs. Listening to the performance gave him the full picture of what the concerto would ultimately sound like, and he was much more motivated to work on his part as a result. Before that, just uttering the words "Corelli concerto" would stress out my son. Today, this former nemesis has become a source of joy for him.

We all need to see the big picture of how what we are doing matters. When we don't understand how our efforts make a difference in a tangible way, we can become frustrated and anxious. God has given each human being a purpose and calling in life, and so it is natural to want to know our lives matter in the grand scheme. One of the cruel punishments Nazi soldiers inflicted on imprisoned Jews was to sentence them to forced labor with no discernible purpose or outcome, such as hauling heavy rocks back and forth all day.<sup>1</sup> The punishment was less physical than it was mental.

The same principle operates for us: the more we feel as though our actions and labors are irrelevant, the more despairing and hopeless we can become. As in the *New York* magazine article “All Joy and No Fun: Why Parents Hate Parenting,” today’s mothers can often reflect that sense of purposelessness and despair in their lives.

Why aren’t today’s women, Christian or otherwise, discovering more joy and fulfillment in their journey as mothers? Perhaps we have a hard time when we don’t understand our life calling and how our contributions make a difference in the larger picture of what God is doing in the world. Perhaps we need to see that bigger picture, just as my son needed to hear the whole concerto, so we can press forward with hope, excitement, and conviction. God has given each of us a piece to play, a melody to fit into the overall redemptive symphony He is writing in the world today. Our job is to discern what our piece is and then to play it with as much skill and passion as we can muster.

So moms need to explore the idea of calling and understand both the specific part God has given them and also how the melody of motherhood fits into the grand symphony of God’s work. And as you’ll soon see, the life God is intending for you may be different from what you imagine a Christian mother’s calling is supposed to be.

## THE CHRISTIAN CALLING

To talk about calling, we must start from the beginning and delve into question of calling for every Christian. Each and every person who is a follower of Jesus shares the same calling, which at the core is not something to do but a Person to know: our calling as children of God is to know Him, first and foremost. As Os Guinness writes, “It’s not about you. It’s about the One who calls you.”<sup>2</sup> Our primary calling is to be with God, to immerse ourselves in His immeasurable love and grace. Everything else flows

out of this connection, which is our absolute number one priority.

Christians can accept and gloss over this concept too quickly. Moms, in particular, are busy, busy people; we just assume that being with God is a reality in our lives. But give the idea another look: *Our primary calling is to be with God.* The most important word in that sentence is “with,” something I learned anew thanks to a recent sermon I heard by Skye Jethani, managing editor of *Leadership Journal*. Jethani said, “Our central calling is to be *with* God, not to do things *for* God,” which he feels is a misconception evangelical Christians often hold. He tells the following story about his experiences working with Wheaton College students as they asked questions about the topic of calling:

I’ve been doing a ministry with a group of Wheaton College students, and they’re great students, great kids . . . But they’ve had it drilled in them that they are the cream of the crop, the most educated and resourced Christians in the world. So when they come close to graduation, they start flipping out on me. They ask, “What path do I take? I want to go be in that place where I will experience fullness of the Christian calling.” They’re so consumed with what’s on the horizon that they forget they’re called to live with Christ right where they are.<sup>3</sup>

It can be easy for all Christians to start thinking that there are things we must “do” for God in order to live more missionally, and I will in fact offer many suggestions along these lines. But the goal of doing things *for* God is a dangerous one unless we place it in proper context. The primary calling for Christians is to be *with* God, in whatever circumstances He has placed us. As we reside in those circumstances with Him, it becomes clearer how we are to serve God in those circumstances. Doing things for God becomes an outflow of our connectedness *with* Him.

As an example, Jethani discusses the scene in Act 16 in which the apostle Paul and his companion Silas were arrested and thrown into prison after being severely beaten. Paul and Silas were “pray-

ing and singing hymns to God.” They were in the Lord’s presence, very much *with* God, so much so that when the earthquake came, their chains were loosened, and the prison doors fell down, Paul and Silas did not choose to escape but remained. Their example of being with God in such a connected way moved the heart of the jailer, who then brought Paul and Silas to his house. Their encounter resulted in the baptism of the guard and everyone else in the household. An entire family was saved due to Paul and Silas’s connection with God, despite the difficult circumstances they were in. They never forgot their main calling, to be with God, which subsequently had an impact on the lives around them.

Being *with* God constitutes the first part of the primary calling God has for all Christ-followers. The second part of that call flows naturally from the first, expressed in the Great Commandments Jesus gives in Matthew 22:37–40: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” As we remain *with* God, as we love Him with all our heart, soul, and mind, He leads us to the second part of the calling. The apostle John also addresses this Christian call to love God and love our neighbors: “We love because He first loved us,” John writes. “If anyone says ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar . . . Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:19–21). Loving others is not something we do out of obligation but as a natural response to the love that God has shown for us.

A simple but memorable illustration regarding loving others has stuck with me for decades. I call it the “cup analogy.” As God fills our cup with His love, it overflows and spills out from us onto others. Loving our neighbors is the natural outpouring that results from being with God as we pursue Him as our central calling.

## OUR GOD IS A MISSIONAL GOD

While the Great Commandments describe our ultimate calling, the Great Commission as stated in Matthew 28:19, in combination with Jesus' final instructions in Acts 1:8, tells us *how* we are to live out this calling. Jesus gives us our mission, which is twofold:

- ☪ “Be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).
- ☪ “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20).

This twofold mission reflects what God wants to do in and through His people. Throughout history, God has shown Himself to be proactive. He creates the world out of nothing; He fashions humankind out of His own image, and then, when clearly His people need a Savior, God sends His own Son to be the solution. Our God is by no means a passive God, who stays far removed from His creation. What has changed since He sent Jesus, however, are His methods. Now He intervenes in the world through His people, embodied in the church and empowered by His Holy Spirit, as we act as His hands and feet in a fallen and broken world. God's end goal is clear: the redemption of all of creation, as we see depicted in Revelation. But God's methods now involve inviting Christ-followers to participate with Him to bring His love, hope, and healing to those who need it. Through Jesus, God has shown us how He has taken the initiative in the lives of all humanity and also how we are to take the initiative in the lives of the people around us.

So our God is a God on a mission. He is on a mission to redeem all of Creation; our God is a *missional* God. In what seems like an incredible plan, He invites us to partner with Him in this

mission. Despite our flaws, despite our weaknesses—or perhaps more accurately, *because* of our flaws and because of our weaknesses—we are called to bear witness to what Christ has done for us and bring that Good News to anyone and everyone, making disciples. As God has been missional in reaching out to us, so must we be missional in reaching out to others. Every one of us is, in fact, a missionary sent by God, loved and empowered by Him to do His will.

Missionaries are not just specially selected people who spread the gospel in distant lands. *You* are a missionary, in whatever context God has placed you, with whatever gifts He has given you. Your mission is to be His witness and disciple-maker wherever you live and move and have your being. This mission does not change when you become a mother.

## THE BIG DISCONNECT

On the one hand, it's absolutely and necessarily true that once children come into our home, our lives change dramatically. We have to spend most of our waking (and many of our sleeping!) hours caring for our children, who arrive completely or largely dependent on their parents for all of their basic needs. But, although the circumstances of our lives change when we become parents, our calling remains the same. We are still primarily called to know and love God, then love our neighbors as an outflow of that relationship. Our mission remains to “bear witness” and “make disciples,” both activities requiring our continuing participation in the world. The calling and mission God has for us *remains unchanged* once we become wives and mothers.

What I have seen time and time again, in my friends' lives, in my own life, and in the lives of countless others reflected in the Christian and secular media, is that we mothers often forget how motherhood intersects with the bigger picture of our primary calling and mission. Sometimes we replace our primary calling and



mission by saying, “Motherhood is my highest calling” or “Motherhood is my primary mission.” When a secondary call displaces a primary one, the confusion begins.

Secondary calls, as Os Guinness explains, are the specific ways we live out the primary call to love and know God. Secondary calls vary from person to person; one woman is called to homemaking, for example, while another is called to law or teaching or medicine or a whole host of other options. But, as Guinness writes, “these and other things are always the secondary, never the primary calling. They are ‘callings’ rather than the ‘calling’ . . . secondary callings matter but only because the primary calling matters most.”<sup>4</sup>

Our lives are full of secondary callings, and being a mother is just one of those secondary callings. In addition to being a mother, I am a wife; I am a daughter; I am a sister; I am a friend; I am an aunt. I am a writer, a member of my church’s mercy and justice ministry, a homeschooling parent. If you make a list, your secondary callings will likely look different from mine. We each have an individual set of secondary callings, some of which change over time. Motherhood certainly does not look the same when our children are young compared with when they are in college or beyond. In various seasons of our lives, we may only focus on a few of these callings, and other times we’ll focus on others. But none of these secondary callings are more important than the unchanging primary calling—not even motherhood.

I do not mean to devalue motherhood in the least. Motherhood is a critical secondary calling for those of us who have been given the privilege of playing that role in a child’s life. But we always need to put our role as mothers in the right context and never prioritize our secondary calling as a mother over our primary calling to know and love God.

God’s mission gives us the direction we need to live our lives with the right priority. Motherhood does not provide us with the direction we need to go. If it did, I doubt we would see the proliferation of articles and books about the hardships of mother-

hood that flood the market today. On the contrary, making motherhood your primary mission could potentially backfire and give your children the wrong message about what our essential life priority is meant to be. But God’s mission informs and guides us in all the secondary callings of our lives—motherhood, vocational paths, or our relational roles. As we pursue God’s mission in our lives—bearing witness to what Christ has done for us, making disciples here and around the world—we are able to see how He can use our secondary callings as channels through which His primary mission will be accomplished.

What this means is that every role, every job, every activity, every person you encounter presents an opportunity to live out God’s primary mission for you, to bear witness to what Christ has done and to make disciples. Whether you are in a vocational setting, a school volunteer committee, at the grocery store or school music rehearsal, or a neighborhood playgroup, you have the chance to do God’s work—in other words, to be missional. Sometimes, we get stuck trying to figure out what we are supposed to do with our lives, when all we have to do is pursue God’s mission with intentionality right where we already are.

## YOUR HOME AS A MISSIONAL OUTPOST

How then should we think about motherhood? One way to adopt a missional perspective is to think of as our homes as “missional outposts.” Home is a place where you are nurturing and training the next generation of missional Christians, who will ultimately pursue God’s purposes in their own lives. It’s the place to give you inspiration and direction, as you seek with your family to discover how God wants to use each of you in His grand mission. Rodney Clapp, author of *Families at the Crossroads*, says that “Christians in our society must retrain themselves to see faith as no less public than private. . . . In a real sense, and like the homes of the New Testament church, our houses must go public. Our call

is to live not in private havens or retreats, but in mission bases.”<sup>5</sup>

So our goal as mothers is not to invest in family life as an end unto itself. That would be like my son pouring effort into his solitary part and isolating himself from the rest of the orchestra. Instead, we invest in our children to help them see the big picture, the greater purpose to which God is calling our sons and daughters. We strive to train our children with the purpose of preparing them to accept their own calling to be God’s missionaries in whatever way He intends. That is missional motherhood. It’s about helping your children recognize and play their God-composed songs and to understand how they are participating in the larger symphony He is conducting today.

Let’s go back to my son, the violinist. When I help him learn his scales and pieces, my goal is not for him to become an excellent violinist for his own glory—and not even for him to get into a good college one day. My object is to help him develop a talent and a gift to be used for God’s purposes. I tell him that the reason we practice is so we keep investing in our gifts as the Bible calls us to do, so that God can use our talents to serve and love others. I am training him to be a missionary in whatever way God intends—and these opportunities can come fairly early in your child’s life if you encourage them.

When you see your home as a missional outpost, your role as a mother becomes clearer: to prepare and release the people inside for a lifetime of participating in God’s mission to the world. But it also means the family as a whole supports the parents in their respective mission fields. If God has given you a talent or gift in a particular area, find ways to continue developing those gifts and interests to serve His purposes.

I have a friend, Irene Cho, who recently discovered she loves to sew. When she had her two daughters, she put her creative gifts aside because it seemed there just wasn’t time for them. Mothers rarely feel there is enough time to invest in whatever creative gifts and talents they might have used before they had

children. But we have to proactively *make* time to stay connected with those areas of giftedness, which helps restore our sense of sanity and purpose, as well as teaching children what it means to keep investing in one's talents for God's purposes. Once Irene understood that she needed to invest in her passion for sewing, she began taking classes and sewing at night while the kids were asleep. She creates beautiful handmade bags and clothing, which she gives away to people as her personal ministry of service. Each creation is her labor of love intended to bless others, and Irene now receives an enormous sense of fulfillment and joy. "It's been a wonderful outlet," Irene says. "And I love being able to surprise others with the gift of something personal and handmade."

Using God-given gifts to bring happiness into the life of another? I call that missional living! And as mothers demonstrate this lifestyle, their children learn that their lives are supposed to be about something bigger and better than themselves. They also learn the important lesson that children are not the center of a mom's life, but that moms, too, are collaborators in God's mission, the primary purpose that can give their lives true and lasting meaning.

Seeing the home as the family's mission base also gives mothers a better perspective on the activities and tasks that go on inside their homes. Each household activity can serve as an important channel for fulfilling the mission God has given us. Even the most mundane task—changing a diaper, doing laundry, cleaning the bathroom—can be seen as having eternal value. Any activity that contributes to the larger mission of supporting the "missionaries" in your family can be a sacred act as you undertake the activity *with* God to advance your family's God-given mission. When motherhood becomes missional, we see much more clearly how our actions and activities play a part in God's redemptive work in our fallen world.

## WHAT KIND OF MISSIONAL OUTPOST WILL YOURS BE?

We all share the same calling as Christians. We now also understand the shared Christian mission and the overarching purpose of motherhood. But at this point, we shift from the shared purposes to the fun part: how will your motherhood journey and the “missional outpost” you create be unique? No two families are alike, and so there will be great diversity in the ways that missional moms (and dads, too, in two-parent homes) create missional outposts. As a starting point, I offer some pointers to remember as you shape your family’s missional culture.

*Maximize shared interests for missional purposes.* My family is a musical one; your family will have its own strengths and gifts. The qualities that make your family unique will provide the best clues for how you might be missional together. What are the shared interests that can serve as a missional platform for your family?

Melinda Boyle lives in Columbia, South Carolina. She is married, with four children ten years old and younger. Melinda is currently a church interpreter for the deaf in her local community. As her children watched their mom communicate in this way over the years, they began to pick up the skill of using sign language in their own communication with deaf children or adults. “My children have become interested in the deaf and in their lives, and how they have overcome and live with what is called a ‘disability,’” Melinda says. “For my kids, it’s a way of life now.” Melinda’s heart and passion for reaching the deaf community—“only 2–4 percent of people who are deaf in America attend church, making them the largest unreached people group in the United States”—have had an impact on her children, who have adopted this missional perspective in their own interactions with the deaf.

*Keep pointing your kids toward the primary calling.* As I put the finishing touches on this book, my family was more than five hundred miles away, staying with my husband and in-laws so I

could complete the project. At first, my kids had a hard time accepting that they would be without Mom for a couple of weeks. I'd never spent this much time apart from my children before! But I repeatedly explained, "Mommy has a job from God to do. I am using my gifts for Him. We must all say 'yes' when God calls us to do something." They came to understand that my priority has to be doing God's work, even if it makes life temporarily difficult for them. And I loved seeing how they came to support my efforts. My older boys prayed for me over the phone every day of our separation, that God would help me and that the book would serve His will. No matter how hard this finite period was on me, my husband, or the boys, they have learned such a valuable lesson in the end: God uses our gifts for His purposes, and when He calls, we must follow.

*Remind yourself often of the "big picture" of what God is doing.* Last year, one of my sons and I were involved in a car accident. We were driving down a neighborhood street when we were blindsided by a car driven by an eighty-seven-year-old who had missed his stop sign. The impact of our cars sent our minivan into another car waiting in the middle of the intersection. Our minivan was crushed beyond recognition or repair, the groceries I had just bought were smashed and smeared all over our trunk, yet miraculously no one was seriously injured.

The incident was my first real experience with a major automobile collision. I found it amazing how suddenly and quickly life could throw me unexpected curveballs. I appreciated that no one was hurt, but the experience reminded me how fleeting life can be and how any number of factors could have turned a bad situation much, much worse. Life is short. The older I get, the faster it goes. Perhaps this is a sign of a midlife crisis, but I've realized that I always want to keep the end goal in mind, never losing sight of my life's overriding purpose. I don't want to get so mired in—and frustrated by—playing my own little tune that I forget there is a much larger symphony going on around me.

Motherhood can be draining, exhausting, and even stifling at times. We all have those days when our patience is short, our nerves are frayed, and our children drive us bananas! But as we seek to shape our homes into missional outposts, we may discover that motherhood can be as much of an adventure as going to a faraway land as a missionary. And as every missionary has learned, an important step before engaging in missional activity is to understand the cultural context she is ministering in. Mothers here in America need to recognize that our cultural context sends powerful messages that often create barriers in our lives, preventing us from serving God's mission and purpose to the best of our ability. We'll take a look at these barriers in the following chapter.