

From Anxiety & Frustration
to Rest & Relaxation

I TRIED

UNTIL

I ALMOST

DIED

SANDRA McCOLLOM

Foreword by Dave & Joyce Meyer

What People Are Saying About
I Tried Until I Almost Died

“We’ve known Sandra McCollom for over half of her life, and she is the real deal—a devoted Christian, wife, and mother. In this book, she shares with honesty and openness how she learned to appropriate God’s grace into her life and experience more joy. . . . Sandra’s story helps us lay aside weights and encumbrances in order to be more effective in the challenges of life (Hebrews 12:1). Pondering these pages will remind you that it was for freedom that Christ set us free (Galatians 5:1). Her words will help you break away from unreasonable perfectionism and begin to excel in the mercy and love of God.”

—PASTORS JEFF AND PATSY PERRY, St. Louis Family Church
(Sandra’s pastors)

“I had the privilege of personally hearing Sandra share her journey of being completely liberated by God’s amazing grace. I am thrilled that you, too, can now hear her story. I have no doubt that you will experience the transformative power of knowing our wonderful Lord Jesus as you see what He has done for Sandra in her own life.”

—JOSEPH PRINCE, international best-selling author of *The Power of Right Believing* and senior pastor of New Creation Church

“In this book, Sandra shares her journey of learning to walk daily in God’s grace and live for His pleasure. When we discover what a wonderful, loving Father we have in God, we can experience a life filled with joy and peace. Our loving Father said, ‘My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness’ (2 Corinthians 12:9). Whatever your heavy load is today, bring it to the Lord. You are His child, and He delights to care for you. May Sandra’s story inspire you to draw near and trust Him today.”

—JAMES AND BETTY ROBISON, co-hosts of *LIFE Today* television

“I love Sandra McCollom and have watched the message of this book literally transform her life. As she has discovered her own belovedness, she now wants to help you discover yours. You will learn that you are already thoroughly loved and approved of by Jesus.”

—CHRISTINE CAINE, founder of the A21 Campaign and best-selling author of *Unstoppable*

“Sandra McCollom offers her readers the ultimate encouragement: God does not expect us to be perfect, and His love and grace extend to us right where we are. In a world that so often pushes us to be as close to perfect as we can, this message promising the relaxation and peace of God’s unyielding grace and love cannot be missed! Sandra is truly a great woman of God with something to say. This book is a must-read.”

—TOMMY BARNETT, co-pastor of Phoenix First and founder of the Los Angeles Dream Center

“Rest is a state of being where we maintain peace. Resting in God is complete peace with assurance that we can place our faith in Him. It sounds so simple. Why then do we struggle and take on unneeded anxiety and frustrations? Sandra McCollom’s book is an honest depiction of personal struggles on the matter and victories found.”

—DR. MARILYN HICKEY, president and founder of Marilyn Hickey Ministries

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To my husband, Steve, and my twin girls, Angel and Starr.

*Thank you for loving and forgiving me
and letting us start over again as a family.*

I love you!

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Foreword by Dave and Joyce Meyer

It is our pleasure to introduce to you our daughter Sandra McCollom and her new and exciting book on grace. First, let us say that Sandra is an excellent daughter. Out of our four children she was the easiest to raise simply because she always wanted to be good. She didn't even cry as a baby, and we took her to the doctor thinking she was too good—something had to be wrong! He assured us she was fine and encouraged us to enjoy it. Even then perfectionist tendencies must have been on the horizon of Sandra's life.

We watched Sandra suffer needlessly through her childhood and teenage years as she pressured herself to be something none of us has the ability to be: perfect. Maybe your own efforts at perfection have been similarly frustrating. Peace is not possible until we understand God's amazing grace in sending us Jesus, the perfect sacrifice, to pay for our sins and take our punishment. Grace is the only antidote for frustration, struggle, and misery.

Sandra knows firsthand what that struggle is like, but thankfully, she also knows firsthand what freedom is like. God has graciously given her a genuine revelation on the power of His grace that is available for every area of our lives. Whether we need forgiveness for sin, strength in difficult times, wisdom for parenting, or anything else you can imagine, God's grace is sufficient to meet all of our needs!

We believe anyone can benefit from reading Sandra's story and will enjoy her fresh approach to teaching grace in a practical way you can apply to your life immediately. We've witnessed for ourselves that she is transformed and, in fact, continues to change as she grows in applying grace to her own life

Foreword

daily. The good fruit popping out on the branches of her life is eliminating the dead leaves of fleshly works that frustrated her and left her angry at herself and life in general.

Today Sandra is excited, enthusiastic, energetic, and in love with Jesus. She loves helping people, and we feel certain you will experience that help for yourself as you read *I Tried Until I Almost Died*.

—Dave and Joyce Meyer

Prison Break

Finding Release from the Shackles of Endless Expectations

From as far back as I can remember until age forty-two, I lived in a prison—not one built of bricks and mortar, but a mental prison, locked up by legalism, rules, and regulations. I placed walls around myself in an attempt to create a place of safety and security, boundaries meant to ensure that I would never step out of line and risk failure, risk God’s displeasure, risk being anything less than perfect.

Instead of feeling secure, I became consumed with a continual sense that I needed to do more, to be more, to achieve more.

Just about everything I did was driven by the belief that I *should*, I *need to*, I’d *better*, or I *must*. Rarely did I do anything because I wanted to. I read the Bible because I thought I had to or God would be upset with me. And yet if you had asked me if I was having consistent devotional time with Jesus each day because I believed I had to or because I wanted to, I would have looked at you like you were crazy. I’ve had a tender heart toward God ever since I was a little girl, and I was always talking about how much I loved Him, but until well into adulthood, I wasn’t very good at letting Him love me.

I wonder if you have found yourself in a similar prison, trapped by the sense that you can never quite do enough or be enough to satisfy your inner drive for more. Do you live with a never-ending, guilt-inducing list of expectations? If so, perhaps you can relate to my story of years spent continually chasing after the flawless life I envisioned for myself.

RULED BY RULES

Throughout much of my adult years, if anyone had asked whether I was happy, I would have wholeheartedly replied, “Oh yes, so happy.” In truth, I was anxious, unstable, and extremely fearful—but believe it or not, I didn’t know it. My extreme ambition for reaching my personal goals hid the struggle going on inside me.

I rose early almost every morning to enthusiastically tackle my unrealistic mile-long list of things to accomplish. Inevitably, I would fail to complete all the items on my list, but somewhere between the end of that day and the next morning, my willpower would pick me back up off the ground and stand me up so I could try again and again and again and again. You see, I have a melancholy-sanguine personality, and the sanguine part would aid me in being positive despite my history of what I deemed to be failure. Every morning I would say (and wholeheartedly believe) “Today is going to be better than yesterday” as I imagined my list of tasks being checked off.

Today’s the day I’ll get this right. I’ll get my act together. I’ll show them, I thought. I’m not sure who I thought “them” was, but now I realize that I was desperately driven to prove to myself and to the world that I was a good Christian, a good wife, a good mother, a good daughter, a good sister, a good employee, and a good friend. Coming up short in any area of life was simply not acceptable to me. I expected peak performance at all times from myself and my family.

Rules were my particular specialty. Nearly everything in the McCollom household operated according to a rule. We must keep the house straightened at all times so Mom won't be embarrassed when people stop by. We must drink enough water or endure another speech from Mom about how water is critical to our health. We must eat healthy and have dessert only once a week because we can't give room to the flesh to want more and more. We must say "please" and "thank you," especially in front of other people so they will think well of Mom. We must place homeschool books on the kitchen table only during the day and not leave them lying around the house. We must get our schoolwork done during the day, or we will work at night too (despite the fact that flexibility is one of the reasons we chose homeschooling in the first place). We must clear our music playlist off the sound system for the next person using it; otherwise we will get a speech on the importance of being considerate of others. We must be obedient. We must put all of our Wii accessories away properly when finished. We must wipe our bathroom counter every day. And we can't forget to wipe the faucet or we will have to march back to the bathroom and do it again. We must clean the entire house every two weeks, even if it doesn't look dirty.

Oh, and friend, let me tell you, I am just getting started. This list is merely a glimpse of the many regulations that gave my world the illusion of orderliness, safety, and control and therefore ruled our days.

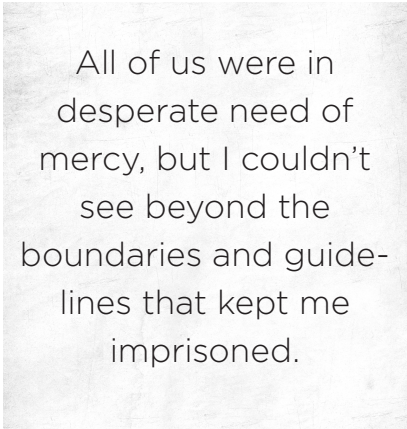
Looking back, I seriously do not know how anyone could have followed all my rules. I wasn't a mean wife or mother, but I was very regimented. If my girls disobeyed in something—how could they not with all those rules?—I felt they needed a consequence, period, end of conversation. After all, I had to keep up my reputation as a godly parent. Certainly there are benefits to having an orderly home, but my requirement for strict adherence to these rules left my girls in continual fear of breaking the law. We all lived in frustration. My girls felt they could never measure up, and I was tired of

trying to enforce my endless rules. All of us were in desperate need of mercy, but I couldn't see beyond the boundaries and guidelines that kept me imprisoned.

And believe it or not, I placed more rules on myself than on anyone else.

For example, I obsessed about eating healthy, feeding my family healthy foods, exercising, and everything else that had to do with health. I read every label of every food item I bought and every personal care item used in our home, such as toothpaste, shampoo, and hand soap, just for starters. I spent hours on the computer to research the various ingredients used in each product so I wouldn't harm my family or myself.

The problem wasn't that I believed in eating healthy and using healthy personal care products; it was the fact that I became completely consumed with fear in this area of my life. Rather than making wise choices with the information I had and trusting God to guide me, I acted as if I alone could ensure my family's health. And yet during that time, when the products in



All of us were in desperate need of mercy, but I couldn't see beyond the boundaries and guidelines that kept me imprisoned.

our home probably were the healthiest they have ever been, I suffered more health problems than in all the rest of my life put together. I certainly don't believe God gave me the health problems, nor do I believe the healthy products backfired. You know what I think? I think stress consumed my life and undermined my health—the stress of trying to be perfect and perfectly

in control, without considering what Jesus had accomplished for me through His finished work on the cross.

I was exhausted from running nonstop on my treadmill of accomplishment. I only allowed myself a break on those days when I had completed all

my duties. But my rest period was brief because I didn't want to lose momentum. I had to keep going to prove to myself and everyone else that my life and my efforts were worthwhile. So I continued pushing myself, running, completely out of breath. *I . . . must . . . keep . . . going!* my mind would scream.

I even became a competitive sprinter at the age of thirty-nine. This was yet another way that I intended to prove my worth and value. I didn't care much about beating other people, but I loved trying to outrun my previously recorded time, always looking to best myself, similar to the way I would race against my list at home.

I desperately wanted to be at peace but couldn't seem to hold on to it for very long. I blamed my circumstances and my schedule. Every time someone got in the way of my plan, especially if it was nearing the end of the day and I realized every item on my list would not be checked off, I would go into a panic, running around the house in a frantic dash to get everything done, all the while throwing out negative, frustrated comments: "I feel like all I ever do is work." Well, I certainly had that right. I did not know how to find my personal worth and value in anything besides work. Or I might blurt out something like "Why do I always have to think of everything that needs to be done around here?" while judging the rest of my family for not taking the initiative I felt they should have.

After comparing notes with others, especially women, I've realized this tendency to hold others responsible for the goals we set for ourselves is all too common. Marla finds herself asking, "Why am I the only one who cares around here?" Jody described the inner dialogue like this: "It usually starts with my thinking *What have you done today?* And then I proceed to itemize the diapers I've changed, laundry I've washed and folded, the meals I've made (and cleaned up), and how many times I've swept the floor . . . all in my head." In her overwhelmed moments Carla wonders, *Why do I even bother? It's not like anyone ever notices.*

Chrissie perfectly captured the mantra that keeps so many of us under constant self-induced pressure: “If I don’t do it, it won’t get done.” For many of us—certainly for me in the days when life was governed by my rules and regulations—the idea of something left undone is utterly unacceptable, no matter how much stress might result from persisting in the goal.

My husband, Steve, is a person who loves peace. He watched as I repeatedly grew frustrated with life, and he prayed that I would see what I was doing to myself. He tried to talk with me about it on a few occasions, but I immediately became defensive: “Well, I feel like I am really peaceful. You just don’t ever see what I do right around here.” Can you believe I actually had the audacity to say that? Steve couldn’t see my so-called peacefulness because it wasn’t real. You can tell what a trap of deception the devil had me in. I already felt so condemned by my inability to keep up with life that I simply couldn’t receive any advice or correction. I couldn’t take feeling any worse about myself than I already did.

Now I realize that it is a miracle of God that my husband and kids did not grow to hate me. I did have a sparkly, bubbly side, but I was all over the map emotionally. At times I felt like I hated my life, which made no sense because I have a wonderful husband and two beautiful girls. The tension in our home mounted each year as I endured almost continual self-imposed pressure and lived in a perpetual state of anxiety. I began to have health problems, including a cyst the size of a cantaloupe. I was buried under guilt and condemnation, certain that my physical trials were a punishment from God for my shortcomings.

What about you, friend? Are you tired of being buried underneath a mountain of guilt and condemnation? Are you fed up with letting your fears govern your life? Let me share with you a secret that I finally learned for myself: guilt and condemnation and trying harder will never deliver us. They

will never drive us to the longed-for destination of sweet freedom. They serve only to weaken us and send us deeper into discouragement.

However, there is a way you can be set free from any and all feelings of guilt and condemnation. I know this is true because I am finally enjoying this freedom. After years of trying harder and harder, I escaped the prison that held me for so long.

It all started when I got so fed up with trying to live the Christian life the way I believed it should be lived that I came to the end of myself at last. Just a week before the end of 2011, I found myself crying out to God. *I can't live like this anymore*, I told Him. *I am so tired, God. I just can't keep up. I need serious help.*

That is exactly what He was waiting to hear!

GOD STEPS IN

After I had lived for years under my own long list of laws, the spirit of independence that drove me finally began to break and I admitted that I needed help.

It was 5:30 a.m. on January 2, 2012, according to my MacJournal. I was just beginning my devotional time. I'd never been a big proponent of New Year's resolutions, probably because, deep down inside, I knew they would just add more rules to my long-running list, more chances for me to fall short of my expectations once again. Nevertheless, that day I reluctantly asked God if there was anything in particular that He wanted me to accomplish in the year ahead.

Well, He certainly did not ask me to accomplish something else, but He did have plenty to show me that morning. I remember typing words into my MacJournal so fast I could barely keep up.

Breaking Free

I told God that I wanted to think less and laugh more in 2012 . . . I get way too mental about things, and this year I want to live more like Jesus did.

About this time I felt the love of God absolutely wash over me like a gigantic wave. I kept typing rapidly as new thoughts and impressions poured into my heart.

I have always wanted to live more like Jesus did, full of peace and laughter, but yesterday it hit me. Jesus never hurried, and He was *not* stressed out. He was *not* in a race with Himself to see how much He could accomplish. He just lived out each day staying in close relationship with His Father and went about doing good to people!

I am getting off the accomplishment train. I am done trying to get my worth and value out of what other people think about me or even out of what I think of myself. God thinks I am special enough that He sent His only Son to die on the cross for me to save me from myself. God loves me so deeply. I receive His love. I consciously take it in right now, just like breathing. I am confident in Christ, and I believe that God is going to allow me and my family to help more people this year than we have ever been able to help before. Jesus was not in a hurry, and I should not be in a hurry. Being too busy—and therefore being in a hurry—has got to be one of the worst deceptions the devil has ever pulled on people. When we are in a hurry, we cannot hear from God, we cannot be consistently loving toward others, and we cannot accomplish what God wants us to accomplish. Oh, we may get our list checked off all right, but not necessarily God's list for the day.

As I typed all of this, I sensed a strong touch from the Holy Spirit. It felt like He was opening my eyes to so many things. The deception that had blinded me to God's love and grace began to peel away layer by layer by layer. I had to squarely face the fact that on many levels I had been living according to deluded thinking.

Some people who experience the kind of mental torment I had put myself through either were raised in legalistic homes or have sat under a lot of legalistic teaching in their churches. They've received continual messages about the "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" of their faith.

This was not the case with me. I grew up in a loving home with wonderful parents, and I have been privileged since childhood to be part of many really great churches. I had actually been taught early on the truth about God's grace. But somewhere along the way I placed myself under the law in an effort to please God. Nobody else was placing me under these rules and regulations. I did it to myself—and not only that, I didn't even realize I was doing it. I was consumed with fears and misconceptions about God, but He was about to show me the truth in a personal revelation of His heart toward me.

The next day as I reflected back on this whole experience and specifically on how I had spent most of my life imprisoned by my own set of rules and priorities, I repented for living like a fool in this area and then proceeded to pray these words:

God, please help me to live this year as You would have me live . . . as Jesus would have lived if He was still here walking the earth. Help me to drop all my expectations of myself and just plop right in the middle of Your plan for me each day. As I start doing this, help me not to get arrogant about it but instead help me to just glorify You!

Please help me to prepare myself and be ready to be used by You at any given moment.

I love You, and I pray this in Jesus' name.

I didn't say anything to anybody about this change in my perspective. Instead, over the next few weeks, I watched with caution as I lived in a peace that I had never known before. I was responding to everything differently, and my life lacked the frustration and anxiety that had previously been my constant companions.

One of the first personal changes I noticed after January 2 was that I stopped racing with myself. I not only got off the treadmill, I couldn't even find it anymore. It was so weird, living without trying to prove something to myself all the time. It felt absolutely wonderful! I kept thinking, *Is this real? Did God do something on January 2 that has made a permanent change in me?* I decided to keep waiting and watching.

Here is a journal entry from January 28:

Well, I obviously realize at this point that I have received an all-out *miracle* regarding the way I view and respond to life. I am so relaxed that it is unbelievable.

As the peace continued over the next several weeks, I thought, *If I don't tell Steve what's going on, why I'm no longer living at such a frantic pace, he might begin to wonder about me.* So I told him while in tears, "God has done something in me. I'm different." Then I shared with him what I just shared with you. Soon afterward, we sat down with our girls to talk about the change in my heart and how we wanted that change to impact our home.

Once God had removed the blinders from my eyes, He also helped me see down to the core of the frustrations in my relationships with my girls. He

showed me that they didn't feel loved for who they were, for themselves, especially when they made mistakes. I couldn't give unconditional love because I didn't know that God loved me unconditionally. Most of the time I pictured God standing over me with this serious look, just waiting for me to mess up, and when I did, I felt I was separated from Him until I got myself "straightened out." I'd been treating my kids the same way that I believed God was treating me. But God, in His mercy and grace, has helped me restore all this, and now we are learning about His endless mercy and amazing grace together as a family every day. This does not mean I am perfect. I still make mistakes, and on some days it feels like I make them endlessly. When I do, I apologize to my girls and ask them to forgive me. We freely forgive in this family because we know we have been forgiven of much.

JOIN ME ON AN INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

Beginning with that January day, the Holy Spirit began leading me on an incredible journey, teaching me to think differently about how He thinks of me! I felt like Job, who said, "I had heard of You [only] by the hearing of the ear, but now my [spiritual] eye sees You" (42:5, AMP). The Holy Spirit helped me—and continues to help me—to see the truth about God as a heart-shaping revelation instead of as head knowledge only.

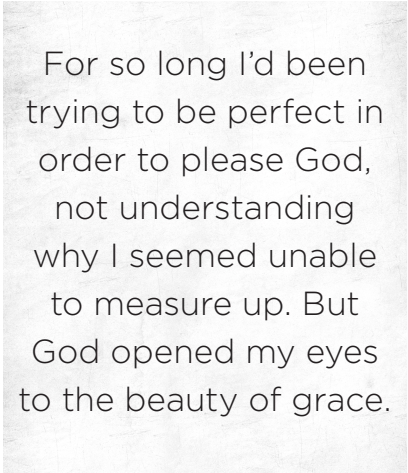
Through His Word and through the biblical teaching of others, God began to reveal to me that I had been living under the law instead of under His grace. Over the next twelve months God radically transformed my thinking and my believing, which in turn transformed my life, my marriage, my parenting, my friendships—not to mention my list of expectations.

I had a critical, destiny-changing moment while reading Joyce Meyer's book *Do Yourself a Favor . . . Forgive*. Although Joyce is my mom and I'd heard these truths from her before, this time as I read them, God spoke to my

heart and I finally understood that I was really angry at myself for not living up to my own expectations of me. As I've explained, previously when I got to the end of each day, I would see only the things that were left on my list, undone. I didn't celebrate the things I had accomplished. I was an all-or-nothing person. I still remember the day, a few weeks after my incredible experience with God on January 2, when I decided to forgive myself for not living up to my own expectations.

For so long I'd been trying to be perfect in order to please God, not understanding why I seemed unable to measure up. But God opened my eyes to the beauty of grace, to the truth "that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, [so] God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift" (Romans 3:23–24, MSG).

As I have come to understand this precious gift over the past few years,



For so long I'd been trying to be perfect in order to please God, not understanding why I seemed unable to measure up. But God opened my eyes to the beauty of grace.

here's what I have learned: grace is God's undeserved, unmerited, unearned favor. When we receive God's grace by faith, it produces His divine empowerment in our lives. But it is important to remember that this empowerment comes from Jesus alone, not us. True grace never arises from our personal work. Paul, the greatest apostle of grace, described this truth clearly in Romans 11:6: "And if by

grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work" (NKJV). True grace always points us back to Jesus and what He has done, not to ourselves or anything we have to do. Grace makes us Jesus-conscious instead of self-conscious!¹



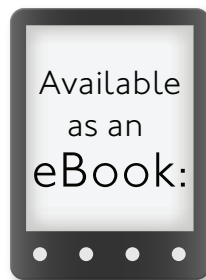
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