



NOTHING TO PROVE

WHY WE CAN STOP
TRYING SO HARD

JENNIE
ALLEN

FOUNDER OF IF:GATHERING

Praise for
Nothing to Prove

“These pages are what your soul is begging for. In *Nothing to Prove*, Jennie Allen reminds us that when we drive ourselves mad chasing perfection, we miss the beautiful grace God designed us to live in. One of the most brilliant Bible teachers of our time, Jennie hands us all emancipation with these pages.”

—ANN VOSKAMP, author of *The Broken Way*

“All I know is that when I’m around Jennie, she makes me hungry to know God better. Her passion to be His above all others—at any cost—stirs something in my soul. Read *Nothing to Prove* and see if some of what she’s learning at His feet doesn’t spill over onto your yearning soul as well.”

—KAY WARREN, Bible teacher and author of *Choose Joy*

“*Nothing to Prove* takes us on a journey toward freedom from the need to measure up. With vulnerable authenticity, Jennie Allen encourages us to wade deep into the streams of the Living Water and live secure in the knowledge that we have absolutely nothing to prove to God or to people.”

—MARK BATTERSON, lead pastor of National Community Church

“It’s one thing to write well about the high concepts of faith or, alternatively, about the nitty gritty of real life. To write well about both grace and Netflix, both the sufficiency of Christ and also homework—that’s very hard to do, and Jennie does it beautifully. I’ve watched her walk this path, and I’m so glad she’s inviting us all into this important conversation.”

—SHAUNA NIEQUIST, author of *Present Over Perfect*

“Jennie Allen calls us to the best version of us—the version God intended. She calls us to rise above ‘woe is me’ and bring into focus ‘God is great!’ We love this glorious and universally resounding message.”

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and Passion City Church

“Jennie Allen shares with great passion and transparency what every weary heart has been longing to embrace: Because of Jesus, we can stop striving. In Him, we are enough. And we have been all along.”

—LYSA TERKEURST, *New York Times* best-selling author
and president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

“With honesty and raw passion, Jennie Allen invites us all to leave behind the proving and pretending that chokes the life out of us. There is more to life than this! Sharing the hard-won wisdom of her own journey, Jennie leads us to the foot of the Cross, where grace and mercy meet and we discover all over again that we have absolutely nothing to prove.”

—JO SAXTON, author, speaker, and board chair of 3DMovements

“In a time when rest is hard to come by, when our days are filled with the constant clamor to be more, do more, and have more, most people feel exhausted and overwhelmed. Using her own life as well as illustrations with which we can all relate, Jennie Allen faithfully proclaims that rest will only be found in Christ’s finished work.”

—MATT CHANDLER, lead pastor of the Village Church, Dallas,
and president of Acts 29

“We live in a world that tries to steal our worth and identity on a daily basis. It shifts our hearts away from God and onto our own shortcomings. I am so grateful that my friend Jennie Allen, in *Nothing to Prove*, gives us all a realignment with the truth of Scripture. This book will help you take your eyes off your problems and put them back on God’s promises.”

—CHRISTINE CAINE, founder of A21 and Propel Women

“Jennie is one of those rare people who holds a fiery and prophetic vision with such tenderness and grace. And because of that, hers is a voice I’m always reading and learning from. In this book she gets my nose in the Scriptures and my knees on the ground, and in my opinion a book that does that is as good as it gets.”

—JEFFERSON BETHKE, *New York Times* best-selling author
of *Jesus > Religion*

“‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.’ Jesus shouted this to a crowd of confused, weak, spiritually thirsty people, tired from trying so hard to be enough and do enough—people like me and you and Jennie Allen. This honest, wonderful book is Jennie’s humble shout that Jesus is telling the truth. It’s her story of finding freedom and refreshment. And if we listen to her, it can be our story too.”

—JON BLOOM, cofounder of Desiring God and author of *Not by Sight*

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WATERBROOK

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Hardcover ISBN 978-1-60142-961-2

eBook ISBN 978-1-60142-963-6

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Cover design by Kelly L. Howard and Lauren Sterrett

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Allen, Jennie, author.

Title: Nothing to prove : why we can stop trying so hard / Jennie Allen.

Description: First edition. | Colorado Springs, Colorado : WaterBrook, 2017 | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016038222 (print) | LCCN 2016046536 (ebook) | ISBN 9781601429612 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781601429636 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian women—Religious life. | Self-confidence—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Self-perception—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Self-perception in women.

Classification: LCC BV4527 .A45 2017 (print) | LCC BV4527 (ebook) | DDC 248.8/43—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016038222>

Printed in the United States of America

2017—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Because of my two sisters (and best friends),
Brooke and Katie.



*You two show me unconditional,
never-going-anywhere,
no-matter-what,
never-have-to-prove-a-thing
love.*

*Through thick and thin
we've tested that this year,
and God through you was solid.
Forever grateful for you.*

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Admitting Our Thirst

Jennie, why are you holding back?”

My closest friends always ask intrusive questions. Wedged into the backseat on our road trip to Houston right before Christmas, I gave my sound-bite answers, not wanting to take up too much of the oxygen in the car and knowing that my life, in comparison to so many, is just not as hard as it sometimes feels.

They didn't buy it. Bekah pressed in again. “I see it, Jennie. I see it on you and in you. You feel so much pressure. Where is the pressure coming from?”

I looked out the car window. Tears burned in my eyes, but I wouldn't let them fall. I couldn't decide if I actually wanted to go there and feel it all. As much as I tried to mean it when I declared, “I'm good,” a steady, silent grief had been growing in recent months. It seemed my chest was always tight, and many nights I lay awake half afraid and half trying to trust God with things like . . .

. . . the nagging insecurities I carry, wondering if any of the ways I am spending my life even matter.

- . . . the growing challenges we were facing with one of our kids and his special needs.
- . . . the grief I feel for my baby sister, who is suffering through unthinkable tragedy.
- . . . the inescapable pressures I feel as I lead a growing organization that has taken on a life of its own.
- . . . the weariness that all of these pressures and more bring.
- . . . the sin that is coming out of me toward people I love because of the stress of all of it.

Ugh. Do I go there? What good will it accomplish?

Wanting to keep my composure, I held back as we drove the few hours to Houston. I wanted to hide behind the familiar posturing that would shift everyone's attention onto the next topic.

I was silent, deciding.

But they weren't going to stop.

Subject change. "Let's stop and eat. Aren't you all hungry?"

They agreed to let me eat if I would open up and tell them how I was really doing. Held hostage by these crazy-good friends, I would have to risk being vulnerable.

Somehow in the posh suburbs of Houston, we found this little shack of a burger joint with a dirt floor and no central heat. We were the only ones there. We huddled around the outdoor heater and ate some of the best burgers we'd ever tasted.

To the constant concern of our darling waiter, who continually brought me napkins, I fell apart and with a lot of tears gave my friends access to all of me: the constant inadequacy I feel, the fears of letting down those I lead or, even worse, my kids, the constant pressure I try to ignore but never seem to escape, the grief for my sister, the doubt that I

often feel toward God even though I preach and write books about Him, the way I had snapped earlier on a poor intern at the office, the constant feeling that no matter how hard I try, I cannot be enough. All the things I didn't want to say, didn't even want to admit to myself, I said them.

For two solid hours my friends gifted me all the oxygen. They sacrificially and without judgment handed it over and forced me to breathe it in, to lovingly receive it without fear. For the first time in a long time, I laughed hard and free. The deep, happy, make-fun-of-your-life-and-yourself kind of laughter.

For those two hours I let myself be a complete fool who didn't have an iota of her junk together. I was free of the expectations, the roles I play, the pressures of real life. Nothing about my circumstances changed in that moment. But everything on the inside shifted. I didn't realize until then that, accidentally, I'd let my life subtly turn into a performance. On that dirt floor, I forgot all of my lines, abandoned all of my roles, dropped all of the costumes . . .

I had nothing to prove.

I drank in grace. I hadn't known that was what I'd been so thirsty for. *Grace*. I didn't know until I confessed my thirst on a dirt floor over burgers. My friends had that grace stored up from the contagious grace of Jesus that they all know well. Like a cold stream, Jesus's grace poured out of them into my dry, weary, thirsty soul.

Maybe you've known that thirst, that deep-within-your-bones craving for relief? Maybe you feel it right now? I'm convinced every one of us is fighting some pressure, some suffering, some sin, some burden—perhaps all of those at the same time. Yet what do we all say when we're asked the question, "How are you?"

We say, "Okay. Fine. Great."

I have a secret for you: Nobody is *okay, fine, great*.

But, goodness, we are all tired of trying to pretend we are.

Are you tired? You are not alone.

The truth I found that day on the dirt floor outside Houston is available and true every day for every one of us. **We need a new way to live.**

Do you want off the stage? Guess what? A cheeseburger and a dirt-floor shack full of grace are waiting for you.

But I should warn you, there is a full-on war to keep you from finding it. If heaven and God and angels and demons are all real, then a real enemy is out to claim all that is good and free and peaceful and joyful in us.

So we start here. We start by realizing we are not alone. We start by recognizing that, indeed, all hell will be out to get us if we decide to live free and enjoy grace.

Ben Rector, one of my favorite musicians, often puts words to music in a way that expresses truth. He wrote, "Sometimes the devil sounds a lot like Jesus."¹

We've been deceived by the lies of an enemy who knows exactly how to twist our thirst to his purposes. And we desperately need to open our eyes to his perverse tactics.

IF I WERE YOUR ENEMY . . .

If I were your enemy, this is what I would do:

Make you believe you need permission to lead.

Make you believe you are helpless.

Make you believe you are insignificant.

Make you believe that God wants your decorum and behavior.

And for years these lies have been sufficient to shut down much of the church.

But now many of you are awake. You are in the Word and on your knees. God is moving through you, and you are getting dangerous. You are starting to get free and leading other people to freedom. The old lies are no longer adequate.

So if I were your enemy, I would make you numb and distract you from God's story.

Technology, social media, Netflix, travel, food and wine, comfort. I would not tempt you with notably bad things, or you would get

suspicious. I would distract you with everyday comforts that slowly feed you a different story and make you forget God.

Then you would dismiss the Spirit leading you, loving you, and comforting you. Then you would start to love comfort more than surrender and obedience and souls.

If that didn't work, **I would attack your identity. I would make you believe you had to prove yourself.**

Then you would focus on yourself instead of God.

Friends would become enemies.

Teammates would become competition.

You would isolate yourself and think you are not enough.

You would get depressed and be ungrateful for your story.

Or,

You would compare and believe you are better than others.

You would judge people who need God.

You would condemn them rather than love and invite them in.

You would gossip and destroy and tear down other works of God.

Either way you would lose your joy, because your eyes would be fixed on yourself and people instead of on Jesus.

And if that didn't work, **I would intoxicate you with the mission of God rather than God Himself.**

Then you would worship a cause instead of Jesus.

You would fight each other to have the most important roles.

You would burn out from striving.

You would think that success is measured by the results you see.

You would build platforms for applause rather than to display God.

Then all your time and effort would be spent on becoming important rather than on knowing Jesus and loving people. The goals would be to gather followers, earn fancy job titles, publish books, build big ministries rather than to seek the souls of men and the glory of God.

And if that didn't work, **I would make you suffer.**

Then maybe you would think God is evil rather than good.

Your faith would shrink.

You would get bitter and weary and tired rather than flourish and grow and become more like Christ.

You would try to control your life rather than step into the plans He has for you.

The enemy is telling you that freedom is only found in finally proving to yourself and to the world that . . .

you are important.

you are in control.

you are liked.

you are happy.

you are enough.

EXPOSING THE LIE

Here is the thing. The enemy promises water, but every time we go to his wells, they are empty. He gives us a sip of water, enough that we keep believing him. We have believed the lie that our cravings will be satisfied if we are enough and if we have enough. So we chase image, answers, things, people—and we wonder all the while, *Why am I still thirsty?*

God is clear in the book of Jeremiah about what is happening:

My people have committed two sins:

They have forsaken me,

the spring of living water,

and have dug their own cisterns,

broken cisterns that cannot hold water.²

Water. No human can survive three days without it. No other resource is more essential to sustain life. None.

When you look at maps of some of the most arid places in the world, you find the cities all along rivers and streams of water. **Where**

there is water, there is life. Vegetation, animals, industry, human flourishing. **And in the absence of water, there is death.**

I don't think you would have picked up this book if you didn't feel thirsty. I believe you are here because you are so thirsty you can't stand it anymore and you pray that maybe this time you will find living, lasting water for life. I am here because I want to fight for you to live, no longer thirsty but filled. I found water. I found rest. And I will show you where it lives.

There is water for you. Not just enough to quench your thirst but an unlimited supply that will fill you and then come pouring out of you into a thirsty world. But the water you need is found in only one Source.

I'll tell you right up front, there is no secret here. Just one answer to your thirst:

Jesus.

"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink," He says in the gospel of John. "Whoever believes in me . . . streams of living water will flow from within him."³

He alone is the Source from which flows all the things we crave and hope to become.

I love that I can begin here, making no empty promises. Because my single goal is to lead your thirsty soul to streams of living water, to Jesus. He always delivers.

Why go here?

Practically speaking, nothing I am facing in my life changed that day on the dirt floor in Houston. And yet everything changed.

I didn't feel so alone.

I felt relief.

I felt loved.

I felt like I could take a deep breath.

I felt known.

I believed Jesus more. That He forgives and is in this all with me.

I felt the groundswell of freedom that comes from living with
Nothing. To. Prove.

I should warn you that finding our way out of the desert of striving
and pressure will not be easy. But I hope you'll come with me anyway.
I'll show you how I found my way out.

Let's start at the beginning, when I learned to chase mirages of
water in the desert . . .



Part 1

OUR DESERT OF STRIVING

My Quiet Confession

The voice has been in my head most of my life.
I am not enough.

He hoisted me up on his lap, and my twelve-year-old scrawny legs dangled over the arm of his worn plaid recliner. Daddy is a dreamer, and this is where we dreamed. His six-foot frame easily collapsed the chair into position, and the two of us stared at the popcorn ceiling and analyzed the world together.

“Any boys paying attention to you, Jennie?”

I offered an obligatory giggle because that was a silly thought at twelve. Soon after, boys *would* become the object of my most obsessive interest, but not yet. Not only was I lanky, but my grandmother had cut my hair down to the nub only a year before. I’m sure her intention wasn’t as unkind as it felt. Then she cocked her head and decided it would look even better with a perm.

My elegant silver-haired grandmother and my fifth-grade self had matching hairdos.

So no, Dad. There were no boys. Well, except for Henry, whose blond mop of hair was wilder than his behavior. After my tragic fifth-grade hair incident, Henry kindly asked if my hair had been sucked off by a vacuum cleaner.

Yep. That still stings a bit.

Daddy and I dreamed and wondered. Grades. Friends. Sports. Boys. He rattled off subjects as if they were part of a secret directory of things daddies everywhere are given to ask their daughters when it becomes difficult to converse with them.

The list wasn't meant to catalog all his expectations; he was just checking in, helping his awkward little darting-eyed girl set goals and find her place. Mostly he was prying, though I only know it now that I've parented a few twelve-year-olds of my own. He couldn't know that at the time, my little first-born brain was racing to assimilate the list and, with it, taking note of a line just beyond my reach. A thick black finish line that marked the place I would accomplish this growing list of imagined and unachievable expectations.

That line would wait indefinitely in the distant border of my mind, enticing me to reach it. Within me, for most of my life, would live a theory that I assumed was a fact: It was possible to arrive at a destination where I would finally prove myself. I would *arrive* at the line marking the place where I finally measured up to my family, my peers, my God, and my own expectations. But like the mirage in the desert, every time I thought I finally was closing in, the line backed itself up.

It all started before I was old enough to notice or be noticed by the boys, when the thought first occurred to me . . .

I was not enough.

During my freshman year at the University of Arkansas, some friends coerced me into joining them in a long line for the Razorbacks cheerleader tryouts. Obviously I was not going to make it—I wasn't much of an athlete. There was the one season of soccer in first grade. Then I tried to run track one year and melodramatically yet genuinely fainted after running the 800 m in my first meet. I did take gymnastics, but I never made the cheerleading squad until my senior year of high school. I don't know if I wasn't good enough or if I made myself so nauseously nervous that I didn't smile. In any case, I knew I wouldn't make it on the college level, but it felt fun to pretend for a few days that I could.

Growing up in Arkansas, I'd gone with my dad to all the Razorbacks games, and what did I do? I didn't watch the boys in pads on the field. Along with a lot of the other little girls in the stadium, I memorized every move the cheerleaders made. Now here I was standing in that line with some of the most darling, athletic girls I'd ever seen, all wearing their National Cheerleaders Association instructor shirts. They held résumés listing every award they'd won and each special team they'd graced.

I had no résumé. One year as a high school cheerleader didn't justify a résumé.

I almost walked away, but I stayed. Despite my lack of résumé, I somehow accidentally made cheerleader in college. Now, I realize you may be put off by these seemingly random stories from my early life with blond boys named Henry and cheerleading tryouts, but hang with me. The world doesn't wait until you reach a certain age to issue you an

identity. From childhood we begin defining ourselves by the loudest messages.

Anyway, with a red little hog on my face and a tiny uniform and inadequacy and fear as near and dear companions, I arrived at my first practice along with the girls who deserved to be there. I felt like a fraud. Add to it that, despite my unremarkable height of five foot three, somehow in the world of college cheerleaders I was one of the tallest.

It all just felt like a tremendous mistake.

Our coach led us up to the second floor of the gym we would soon call home for three to four hours each day. The second floor stretched out down a long white hallway with doors leading to offices. The only thing visible at the end of the hallway was a medical scale. We lined up and stepped on the rickety metal scale. The coach held a clipboard and scribbled down our weight beside each of our names. She would go on to do this every six weeks for the next several years of my life. If our weight crept up from that point more than a few pounds, the coaches would tell us to lose weight or be benched. That only happened to me once.

Then a little girl who never felt lovely enough met a college career of scales and began a deep tailspin into a five-year eating disorder and obsession to try to control her appearance.

All because of the dark familiar line in the distance reminding me . . .

I was not enough.

“People don’t think about you as much as you think they do.” My practical mom used to reassure me of this when I was in seventh grade and

built massive conspiracy theories about why I didn't get invited to crucial social events such as Stephanie Angelo's end-of-year sleepover. She meant it to be comforting. And strangely it was. I never wanted to be the object of people's thoughts; it seemed too risky when my oxygen was their approval.

Then I became a pastor's wife. And guess what? My mom's middle school mantra failed me. Because people definitely thought about me more than I wished they did. Whether our kids attended public or private school. How we spent our money. How our kids behaved. Who our friends were. How my husband was leading and even what attire he wore. All these topics and more were regularly brought to my attention or questioned.

Most weekends my husband, Zac, was busy prepping sermons, and every Sunday morning he was gone before I was even awake. Usually Conner, my oldest, was up first and the other two kids would follow. Each week brought renewed fights over brushing hair and teeth and what everyone should wear. Eventually I gave up on idealistic concepts such as hair bows. My earnest dream was to arrive at church on time, but it was rarely realized.

Eventually kids were wrangled into their Sunday school classes, and I began the walk down the hall to the meet-and-greet called church.

I've never been great at meet-and-greets, but as a pastor's wife, I came to fear them.

You may find it helpful to know that I have a condition called attention deficit disorder (ADD). I know a lot of people joke about having ADD, but for those of us who actually have it, our brains work differently than everyone else's. My ADD makes it difficult to focus in rooms full of people. I guess most people's brains can ignore the other

conversations happening, the baby crying, the worship that has already started in the gym, the footsteps coming up behind you. But I can't. I hear everything.

ADD brains have two modes: one is called hyperfocus, the ability to zero in on one thing so completely that it is as if not one other thing exists on the whole earth, as if I am in a completely other world. The other mode is that the brain moves so quickly from one thing to the next that it is nearly impossible to focus on anything. If I am in control of a situation, for instance you and I are having a quiet conversation over coffee, I can turn on my hyperfocus drive and you would never know I have ADD. But a meet-and-greet is torture for my brain. A simple conversation becomes a daunting challenge, especially after managing three young kids all morning.

Each Sunday after dropping off the kids, I walked down the hall of our church plant full of dread. The people were not the problem; I adored the people. Their seeming expectations of me were the problem. I desperately wanted to prove to them that I was an asset to Zac in the way I cared for our people. When you plant a church, there are no buildings, no programs, no history to help visitors assess whether this church is a good fit, so people often decide if they want to stay based on the pastor and his vision and his wife.

Do we trust the pastor and his wife? Do we like them? Can I follow them? I knew that each week in our small growing church, most people were asking themselves these questions.

Todd must have passed me in that hallway when I was full of dread. He likely said hi to me and smiled. I didn't smile back—because I didn't hear him say hi.

One week I got a call from Todd's wife. "Are you upset with us?"

Nothing could be further from the truth. They were some of our easiest friends. Why was Rachel asking me this?

Rachel went on, “Todd says he has tried to speak to you several times on Sunday mornings in the hallway, and you always ignore him.”

Trust me, passive-aggressive is just not my shtick. If anything, I am probably *too* direct when something is bothering me. Of course I wasn’t mad and ignoring Todd, but how could I explain all the pressure I felt on Sundays to measure up and perform? How could I describe what it felt like to walk into church with three barely dressed kids and a church full of people deciding if we were enough for them? How could I tell her I have ADD and I didn’t even hear Todd multiple weeks in a row?

So I didn’t. I just apologized and assured her we were great.

But from that point on when I walked down that hallway, I added to my growing list of pressure-soaked to-dos: smile and say hi to every person I pass.

I was not enough.

My kids’ school sent an e-mail asking to meet. Across from me, three administrators sat with their prepared notes, and I sat helpless and completely ill prepared.

“Your child is not succeeding, and we wonder if he is getting the help he needs at home?”

“We know you work and travel a lot.”

“We know you all are so busy.”

While the words were said kindly, they expressed my worst fears:
I am not enough.

I am not doing enough.

I am not measuring up as a mother.

My child is not measuring up, and it is my fault.

I ached to offer my genuine explanations: *I could not love this kid any more than I do. I am always helping him with schoolwork. Oh, how I pray for him. I have missed so much work trying to get him the right help.*

I didn't say anything.

Instead, I fought back tears and stifled all my inadequate defenses. I listened. I asked questions. And then I walked out and collapsed in tears in the driver's seat of my car. I couldn't breathe. I drove home and ran past Zac, who looked at me to ask who was taking Kate, our fourteen-year-old, to track practice. I couldn't answer. I was just looking for somewhere to hide.

I lay down on the floor of my closet, grabbed a dirty T-shirt from the floor, and hid my face in it. I cried harder than any human should. When I finally took a deep breath and dried the tears and opened my eyes, my first thought was, *Dang, my closet is a wreck!*

My breath was gone and the tears in the T-shirt were back. Leave it to a disaster of a closet to push me over the edge.

I was not enough.

For so many years the voice has been in my head: *I am not enough.*

Is it possible you hear that same voice?

Maybe you've never struggled with an eating disorder or with the pressures of being a pastor's wife, but I'm convinced nearly all of us feel

this incredible pressure to prove we measure up in some way. Every morning we face the list of tasks left undone the previous night, the expectations of our family and coworkers, the burden to be the beautiful, strong, and gracious ideal humans that we're convinced the world, the church, and God require. We sense that somewhere, with everyone watching, is an ominous scale and a clipboard recording our results. We all fight feelings of inadequacy.

We walk around desperately afraid we don't measure up. We slap on self-esteem strategies that feel a little like playing pretend dress up when we were seven. We think that we are someone grown up and lovely and accomplished, and we want to be someone grown up and lovely and accomplished.

But deep in our marrow, we know it is pretend. We are not enough. So we spend our lives trying to shift that reality.

God has a different story line for us, one in which our souls are content and epic stories unfold through our lives here—but not because of us.

In spite of us.

Romans is pretty clear about our reality: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”¹

But what if we have everything backward? What if there was a story where the ones who aren't enough, the ones who recognize they don't measure up, are the very ones the God of the universe picks to move wildly in and through?

What if I told you today you could stop trying so hard and simply rest?

What if I told you today you could start enjoying yourself and your life without performing or striving for another minute?

What if I told you that you don't measure up? And that it's okay. In fact, it's necessary.

I didn't go out looking for a big vision for my life. I woke up the night of my thirtieth birthday and couldn't sleep. I couldn't shake the phrase spinning through my mind: *disciple a generation*. It was a silly thought. I was a mom of young kids and a pastor's wife of a small church. I didn't have a platform or influence. I didn't even have a Twitter account. What was I supposed to do with this?

I remember for two days it felt as if my bones hurt, I was so burdened by what God wanted me to do with such a ridiculously nebulous and enormous task. I mentioned it to a few good friends, who wisely told me, "If this is God, Jennie, He will make it happen."

I agreed there was no clear step to take, so I laid that burden aside and moved on with my already full life.

Then a few years later my husband and I began praying a simple prayer: "Anything, God." Convicted by the life of Katie Davis—she was living in Uganda and had adopted multiple girls off the streets, laying down her life in such a way it was contagious—we surrendered every part of our lives to Jesus in a more terrifying absolute way than we ever had before. "Anything, God." We prayed it, and God initiated the kind of events my friends had said to wait on. God started to open doors I wasn't even knocking on.

I'd been teaching a Bible study in my home for years. But I knew I held back and kept it small, always inviting only a few safe friends. But, goodness, I loved teaching the Bible. I always have. The moment I came

home from summer camp after trusting Christ, I seemingly instinctively gathered a handful of younger girls and started teaching them the book of Revelation. Hysterical. I know now that probably wasn't the best choice. But teaching the Bible was and is like breathing for me.

Yet navigating the pressures of being a pastor's wife seemed enough, and choosing more leadership seemed terrifying because leading always coexists tightly with criticism. My skin was so desperately thin. But I knew I wanted to please God and quit living for other people's opinions. So in the fall of 2009 for the first time I took the risk of opening the doors of our study to any women who wanted to attend while I taught *Stuck*, a study I had written for some women in my living room. They came—150 people from different backgrounds and age groups came together. People trusted Christ for the first time. Women were freed of bondage they'd fought for decades, and they were starting to have their own convictions and dreams to serve God. Obedience seemed to be contagious. God was moving in our little corner of the world in a way I had not seen since college.

And only one year later, without much effort on my part, I was given opportunities to publish my studies and speak on some of the biggest stages in Christendom. The girl terrified of 150 people's opinions now would have to face one hundred thousand of them. These were never the goals or the dreams I had.

God was shoving me out of every comfort I craved. I didn't want to deal with opinions and judgment, I didn't want to risk appearing arrogant, I didn't want to make Zac uncomfortable, and I didn't want to miss the familiar easy rhythms I enjoyed with my kids.

Yet the words *disciple a generation* continued to echo in me. I couldn't shake the sense that God was causing these opportunities to

unfold for purposes beyond my understanding and certainly beyond my fears.

I began having small, seemingly insignificant conversations in which I shared some of the dreams and hopes I felt stirring. The question I couldn't shake was this: IF God is real, then how are we going to live like it? And thousands of women around the world responded, drawn to the beauty of what it would mean to dream together about how to unleash our faith. IF: Gathering was born.

Our first gathering launched to an immediate sellout, and then women around the world rose up and rallied to lead gatherings in their homes and churches and cities. Within a short while, an army of women was coming together around the name of Jesus to use their gifts and spend their lives discipling the world. We were working hard and doing our best to pursue God with excellence, but it often seemed we were making more wrong decisions than right ones. Yet despite the chaos of our inexperience and missteps, the vision was resonating. IF was beginning to take on a life of its own, and I was mostly just terrified. I was desperately afraid I was not equipped to lead this.

The world saw a powerful, gorgeous work of God uniting women to obey and follow Jesus, but behind the scenes, IF also was costing us many of the things I most feared: relational conflict and personal rejection and disappointment and an overwhelming amount of time and energy required to lead this growing vision.

I wanted nothing more than to please God. Yet the intensity of the growing army was pushing me into more and more places I felt ill equipped to lead, and I wasn't sure how much longer I could pretend to be holding this together. I desperately feared that the words always bouncing around my head were true:

I am not a leader. I am not cut out for this. I. CAN. NOT. DO. THIS. God, You picked the wrong girl.

I am just not enough.

And the more IF kept growing, the more I feared that a whole lot of people would find that out.

Nine years after the sleepless night that brought the weighty conviction to *disciple a generation*, IF was no longer just a dream. I found myself behind a curtain peering out at women who'd come hungry and expectant, wanting more of God. It was our third time to gather, and now over one million women in more than one hundred countries watched and waited for the video broadcast to begin.

Six steps were all that separated me from the stage.

It did not help that this was one of the biggest stages in music history. Wrapping the backstage halls of Austin City Limits at the Moody Theater were iconic images of some of the greatest artists of all time, all who have commanded this same stage. Willie Nelson. Mumford and Sons. Diana Ross. They haunted me. They mocked me. This is *the* music stage of Texas. This is the stage the greats play.

They all must have walked up these steps with confidence equivalent to their brilliant talent and gifts.

I kept staring at the steps and wondering what would happen at the top, when I looked past the heavy black curtains and into the waiting eyes. The world would say to me, "You are successful. You've done it. You are finally enough." Yet I will tell you a secret. As I stood on what should have been miles past the thick black line of my expectations, it

still loomed just out of reach, mocking me. *Enough* is a mirage that cannot be caught. You and I can keep chasing it, or we can quit the childish game the enemy taught us young.

In that moment I could have owned what the world was telling me. It would have been nice to agree for just a moment that maybe I had arrived, that I am a confident leader with a crystal-clear vision. But standing there, I knew that I was not . . .

brave enough . . .

smart enough . . .

gifted enough . . .

sure enough . . .

strong enough . . .

to lead this movement.

I knew I was not enough.

Six steps. I walked up them, and that day, rather than pretend I was enough, I stood on that historic stage and I let out my quiet confession in front of more than a million people.

I am not enough. And I am done trying to be.

It was one of the most peaceful and freeing moments of my life.

While God may not be prompting you to announce your inadequacy from a stage, I'm going to guess that something in your life requires more than you can deliver.

Maybe you are in a difficult marriage and every day is a struggle. Maybe you are buried in debt and unpaid bills. Maybe you have a child with special needs that requires you to wade deep into complicated

paperwork, psychologists and psychiatrists, and therapies. Maybe one of your parents is slowly fading into dementia. Maybe you feel paralyzed with anxiety or isolated by depression.

Whatever it is that set your world reeling, how will you move forward? Striving, pretending, white knuckling—or free? My dream is that you would embrace your worst fears head on and find that our God is enough for them. My prayer is for you to start enjoying the freedom that comes when we quit trying to prove ourselves, when we surrender what is out of control to the One who is in control.

We strive to be seen, to be known, to matter. We're desperate to believe we are doing a good job at whatever has been entrusted to us.

But we are not enough. We are not God. We don't have all the answers, all the wisdom, all the strength, all the energy. We are finite, sinful beings. And that is okay.

In fact, it is the confession that unleashes the freedom we are achieving for.

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