

KRISTEN RUSCH & ASHLEY DURAND

Mothering *on* Empty

How Moms like You

Found God's JOY



There are days with my three kids when I'm very fulfilled and simply loving life as a mom. Then there are days when I'm discouraged and weary and wondering if I'm doing much of anything right! *Mothering on Empty* encourages the soul on those hard days and renews a mom's sense of mission and joy when we feel unrewarded for our hard work. The authenticity, perspective, and biblical wisdom in these stories are desperately needed. With the power of the Holy Spirit, healthy community, and books like this one, we've got this, mamas!

REBECCA ST. JAMES, songwriter, actress, Dove Award-winning recording artist, cohost of the *Practice Makes Parent* podcast, and author of *Lasting Ever*

Mothering on Empty offers an encouraging perspective for moms who feel disconnected from Jesus. Ashley Durand and Kristen Rusch offer relatable stories and ways moms can reclaim the joy of knowing God during this season of life.

ERIN SMALLEY, author, counselor, speaker, and cohost of the *Focus on Marriage Podcast*

Mothering on Empty is the encouragement I always needed, especially during the early years raising my kids when I felt exhausted and alone. Ashley and Kristen feel like two kind, wise friends who come alongside you to offer true compassion and practical help. It's hard to take time to read when you're raising little humans, but this book is worth picking up because it's so nourishing to a mom's soul.

MAGGIE PAULUS, artist and author of *A Light Brightly Shining* and *Finding God at the Kitchen Sink*

A gentle, grace-filled companion, *Mothering on Empty* is the book every weary mom's heart needs. Through raw stories and biblical encouragement, Kristen and Ashley remind us that true joy isn't found in perfect motherhood—it's found in the presence of a perfect God. If you've ever felt overwhelmed, inadequate, or just plain worn out, this book will meet you with hope and point you to lasting joy.

CRYSTAL PAINE, *New York Times* bestselling author, mother of six, and founder of moneysavingmom.com

Mothering on Empty feels like a sweet coffee date with a friend. This book puts words to feelings while also providing an action plan for mothers.

CHRISTINA WATKINS, mother and former youth pastor, now encouraging other moms at [instagram.com/raisingkindbabies](https://www.instagram.com/raisingkindbabies)

Mothering on Empty is a balm for the soul that weary moms don't know they're desperate for until they open its pages and exhale. Kristen and Ashley have created more than just a book—it's a hand to hold in the dark and a whisper of truth when the lies of inadequacy are loudest. This book is a sacred patchwork of stories and Scripture that will help you trade shame for grace, guilt for joy, and burnout for sacred strength. If you've ever whispered, *I can't do this anymore*, let this book be the voice that replies, *You don't have to do it alone*. Take it in slowly, like a warm drink in a quiet moment. You'll find Jesus on every page.

MANDY ARIOTO, author, speaker, and CEO of The MomCo (formerly MOPS International)

Being a mother is a sacred partnership with God. When the demands of parenting are overwhelming, moms can feel isolated and weary. Filled with insights and shared experiences, *Mothering on Empty* assures us that we moms are in this together. Keep this title handy when you want to connect with and be encouraged by others who understand how you feel.

PEGGYSUE WELLS, bestselling author or coauthor of more than forty books, including *The 10 Best Decisions a Single Mom Can Make*

Mothering *on* Empty

How moms like you found God's JOY

KRISTEN RUSCH & ASHLEY DURAND



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Mothering on Empty: How Moms like You Found God's Joy

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About This Book

Have you ever thought about what motherhood would have been like for Eve in the garden of Eden had she not sinned? Presumably, it would have been filled with endless joy, peace, and love. She would have had God walking beside her through each season of her motherhood journey. She could have asked Him directly for insight into what her children needed, and He could have helped her through it all.

Now, has it ever occurred to you that God still wants that kind of motherhood for us? Something beautiful and close to His heart? In our fallen world, we have an enemy lurking in the shadows, trying to ruin God's good gift of motherhood. Seeking God's intended design for motherhood is both a duty and an adventure. It is full of peril, risk, hardship, and fear. It requires bravery and walking near God daily. We believe He wants to help us find the joy He offers in the gift of this role. We also believe that joy is readily available, even during the trials and uphill climbs mothers so frequently face.

That's what this book is all about.

Think of this book as a patchwork quilt of encouragement for disheartened and weary moms. The contributors come from varied

backgrounds. We don't claim to be parenting experts, but every single page contains words lovingly crafted by a mother who has volunteered part of her story. Some stories are old; others are new. It's part devotional, part memoir, part Bible study, part inspiration. It's a diverse and yet very purposeful tapestry of accounts from real Christian moms with a desire to uplift and uphold one another in the journey of motherhood. We created this book as a source of healing, strength, and encouragement for every mom who reads it—to equip her with a road map to help her discover the joy available to her.

Have you ever felt joyless but not been sure why? Mothers don't always have time to reflect on what is stealing our joy, though the potential culprits are many: exhaustion, hormones, feelings of inadequacy, even spiritual warfare. That's why at the end of each entry we've included "Joy Thief" and "Fight Back" sections, which will help identify some culprits that can rob our joy and what to do about them. Then we close out each entry with a quote to carry with you for inspiration.

Scripture tells us that Satan would like nothing more than to steal our joy, kill the spark in our spirits, and destroy the blessings that God intends for us (John 10:10). As a result of mankind's fall in the garden, our bodies and circumstances are imperfect. But in Christ we are more than conquerors (Romans 8:37). When we draw near to God, His Spirit gives us the power and strength to overcome our selfish desires and instead be filled with His fruit—including joy (Galatians 5:22). We can don the spiritual armor of God to effectively battle against the spiritual forces of evil (Ephesians 6:10-17). *Through Christ we are victorious* (1 Corinthians 15:57).

Let us be alert for joy thieves—and let us fight back!

. . . being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy . . .

COLOSSIANS 1:11

“IN THE GARDEN”

C. Austin Miles

*I come to the garden alone,
while the dew is still on the roses;
and the voice I hear, falling on my ear,
the Son of God discloses.*

(chorus)

*And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
and He tells me I am His own,
and the joy we share as we tarry there
none other has ever known.*

*He speaks, and the sound of His voice
is so sweet the birds hush their singing;
and the melody that He gave to me
within my heart is ringing.*

(repeat chorus)

*I'd stay in the garden with Him
tho' the night around me be falling;
but He bids me go; thro' the voice of woe,
His voice to me is calling.*

(repeat chorus)¹

Preface

The fruit of the Spirit is . . . joy.

GALATIANS 5:22

Most of us have probably heard the phrase *the joy of motherhood*. And while I wholeheartedly believe there are *many* enjoyable aspects of motherhood, I think this phrase can also be misleading. These four words can lead us to believe that we derive our sense of joy from motherhood.

This simply isn't true. While God does give us many beautiful things to *enjoy*—including our children—He only ever intended for *Himself* to be our true source of joy.

When the Ten Commandments tell us not to worship idols (Exodus 20:1-6), we often think of cultures who erect statues dedicated to ancient deities. Yet even modern-day Christians are guilty of erecting idols in our hearts—of elevating otherwise good things (marriage, careers, ministry, relationships) to a position that God alone should hold.

I've come to realize that I once idolized motherhood. Rather than looking solely to God, I subconsciously looked to motherhood as a source of joy, self-worth, and fulfillment. And much like the way man-made statues don't come through for a given culture, I also found myself let down when motherhood didn't

come through for me. Not because motherhood isn't wonderful (it is!) but because I elevated it to a position that belongs only to God. And that robbed me of the ability to enjoy it as the Lord intends.

Elevating motherhood to an unhealthy status isn't the only thing that can rob us of our joy. After all, motherhood can be hard! Research reported by by MOPS International (now The MomCo) tells us that 60 percent of moms report feeling lonely, 50 to 80 percent of women suffer from "baby blues" and/or postpartum depression, and a sobering 89 percent of all stay-at-home moms feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities.¹

Moreover, our enemy would like nothing more than to do whatever he can to prevent us from partaking in God's joy. He wants us to believe any number of lies that can keep us from enjoying the gift of our children.

It's easy to fixate on our circumstances rather than fix our eyes on Jesus. Our natural responses to trying circumstances (discouragement, fear, resentment, sadness) can create barriers between us and the joy God offers and desires for us. Remaining stuck in our natural reactions and feelings will almost certainly rob us of God's joy. Choosing joy doesn't come naturally; it is a conscious decision.

And yet focusing on Jesus as our supernatural source of joy is neither easy nor straightforward. Each of us has hurdles to overcome. Indeed, each of the authors has contributed her story to this book with vulnerability and with a desire to encourage moms by sharing authentically about her struggles and about how God has met her with His joy.

This book is meant to give struggling moms the space and freedom to process the everyday hard stuff—the things few people want to discuss openly—without judgment, criticism, or jumping

to conclusions. We want to help every reader effectively identify the reactions to her circumstances that are currently standing between her and taking hold of God's joy. We declare and testify that *no mom has to remain without joy. It's readily available to all of us!*

It took years of struggle, but the Lord has graciously helped me put Him back on the throne of my heart. I've learned—and am still learning—to take my eyes off trying situations and look to Him as the source of my joy. He's helped me see that my discouragements and disappointments as a mother haven't been the result of Him letting me down but have been tied to my unhealthy expectation that raising children would fill a God-only role in my life.

Motherhood *can* bring us joy when things are going well but not so much when things get tough. It's *God's* joy that instills in us the comfort and peace that can supersede our circumstances. It's His joy that anchors us to the truth of who we are in Christ and to the victory we have in Him. It's His joy that sustains us in the darkest and driest seasons of motherhood.

Only the Lord can take our deficiencies and replace them with the supernatural sufficiency of His Spirit. Joy is one of God's supernatural remedies; He gives us calm for our anxious hearts, perspective and sanity for our racing minds, hope for our fragile spirits, and eternity-focused gladness for our weary souls. He can take the inescapable hardships of this life and transform them into something beautiful (see Isaiah 61).

Praise God we have a heavenly Father who won't leave us lacking—who wants to bless us with every good thing. As David declares in Psalm 34,

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

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Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints,
for those who fear him have no lack! . . .
Those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

PSALM 34:8-10

With God on the throne of your heart, regardless of what life throws at you, you don't have to continue mothering on empty. With Him you can experience the fullness and beauty of mothering from a place of *joy*!

Kristen Rusch

What Is Joy Exactly?

*You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

PSALM 16:11

So . . . *joy*. What is it exactly? Explaining it can be difficult. If you're anything like me, you probably have a general idea of what it is. For example, I know it is a positive thing—a good feeling, listed as fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), something I should want and experience—but I've never been clear on its exact meaning. It wasn't until I explored the concept of joy in relation to motherhood that God helped me clear up some of the ambiguity.

If you've spent much time in Christian circles, you've probably heard, "Joy is not the same as happiness." And allow me to say *thank goodness for that!* Take a look around, and I guarantee that you'll find someone chasing a fleeting sense of happiness. I'm certainly guilty of it.

Our culture, this world, seems obsessed with the pursuit of happiness. Dare I suggest it's the driving force of the non-Christian life? In a life without Christ, without eternity, what's the point of living besides obtaining anything and everything that makes you happy? If you've scrolled through any popular streaming site

recently, you may have noticed that Hollywood certainly preaches this message.

In this life, however, we only glimpse a dim reflection of the happiness we will one day experience in the presence of our King. As Paul says in one of his letters to the Corinthians, “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

With that in mind, do we give up on happiness altogether? No. Paul says in one of his letters to Timothy that God “gives us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Timothy 6:17, NKJV). But in addition to enjoyment, believers have good news that others don’t—that there’s something more substantial and more fulfilling available than momentary happiness. Through the power of His Spirit, God offers us lasting joy.

Such joy is better than any temporary happiness. And this goes for mothers, too. Now, I’m *not* saying that motherhood is devoid of happiness. (Though I’ve experienced times when I’ve felt like that was the case.) What I am saying is that since motherhood falls under the big umbrella of *life*, it’s logical to think that the same principles of joy versus happiness should apply to this role as they do to the bigger umbrella.

To begin with, *Merriam-Webster* defines *joy*—a noun—as

1. a: the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires: delight;
b: the expression or exhibition of such emotion: gaiety
2. a state of happiness or felicity: bliss
3. a source or cause of delight¹

But does Scripture agree? Let's investigate what joy is and is not. Here's an important defining passage from the New Testament: "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11).

The Greek word rendered "joy" in this verse is *chara*, the noun form of the verb *chairō*, which can mean these things:

- to rejoice, be glad
- to rejoice exceedingly
- to be well, thrive²

Quite a bit different from *Webster's* definition, right? There's no mention of good fortune or possessing what one desires or even happiness. Ultimately, the reason for that difference is because of the difference in the source of joy.

Now let's look at an Old Testament passage:

You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

PSALM 16:11

The Hebrew word rendered "joy" in this verse has a similar definition and can be translated similarly to the one in our New Testament verse,³ and it's critical to understanding where joy is *found*. Let's jump back to the New Testament: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Now let's tie all this together. The Greek word translated "rejoice"? You guessed it: *chairō*, the verb form of the word translated

“joy” in John 15:11.⁴ And what’s the context of John 15? The concept of abiding in Christ and abiding in the Father’s love—the same concept as in Psalm 16:11. (Bonus info: The joy listed as fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5? It’s a by-product of walking in God’s ways and having His Spirit *dwelling in us*.) The bottom line? *In the presence of God is where joy is found*. Apart from Him, true joy is impossible.

This, at least to me, is super exciting. Joy isn’t a feeling I can just muster up. Its source is not within me; it originates with God. It’s a result of being in His presence and partaking in His goodness. It can’t be found anywhere outside Him. It’s not dependent on my current circumstances or some sort of good fortune but is continually available through our never-changing Lord. Joy is found when I set aside my own desires for the sake of following and obeying Christ. Joy is never forced upon me but is available for me to partake in. And best of all, it is the beautiful result of walking in the fullness of all God is and has.

Therefore, for the purposes of this book, I will pose the definition of *joy* as follows:

Joy is a *chosen* state of being, a state of celebration and gladness in the unshakable truths of God that supersede external circumstances and the realization of our own desires. Joy is available only through partaking in the presence of God and walking in His ways.

I also know that that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Throughout this book we will explore the concept of joy at greater length and discuss how it applies to the life of a mother. But for now, we at least have a working definition to use as our foundation.

What Is Joy Exactly?

I pray that God will continue to illuminate the beauty and potential that this little word (representing a complex idea) contains for each and every one of us.

Kristen Rusch

Full Joy

*“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you,
and that your joy may be full.”*

JOHN 15:11

Joy often feels evasive to me. Especially in the throes of the unpredictability of motherhood. One minute I seem to have a grasp of it; the next minute it’s slipping through my fingers and I’m swirling in an emotional sea of turmoil.

The status of my joy often feels like a birthday candle. Sometimes I’m burning nicely . . . until a slight breeze or puff of air comes along, and *poof*—there goes my joy (like when I manage to pry myself out of bed for some quiet time before anyone else is up and the second I crack open my Bible one of my children awakens). Sometimes I manage to keep my joy lit for much of the day, until one of my boys whacks his brother in the face with his toy fishing pole and my joy candle ends up a sputtering mess.

Moreover, my joy can be hard to resurrect once it’s gone. Going through the “terrible twos” with my oldest son was a dark season for me. Granted, this stage is rarely any parent’s favorite, but in my case, the mental, physical, and emotional toll I experienced was extensive and profound. I would go weeks at a time without much

joy. Many days I was miserable, and it showed. During that season I needed significant encounters with the Lord to jump-start my joy.

What's the secret to holding on to joy? What am I missing? I asked God.

He directed me to the book of John.

What I found is that joy isn't something I'm supposed to muster up on my own. It's not found in pleasant circumstances or in having compliant kids. In fact, joy is there specifically *for* hard circumstances and unpleasant situations.

In John 13 through 17, Jesus is with His disciples in the upper room, just hours before beginning His torturous road to Calvary. He begins by washing their (very dirty) feet as a demonstration of self-sacrificing love and service. He proceeds to impart His final teaching before His death, preparing them for what He knows will be some of the most trying and heartbreaking moments of their lives (not to mention His own).

In chapter 15 He presents Himself in an unusual way. He describes Himself as “the vine,” while His followers are “the branches.”

It doesn't require much knowledge about growing grapes to know they need to stay connected to the vine in order to remain healthy and growing. Jesus says we need to do that too. If we want to have a healthy spiritual life and bear fruit, we need to abide in Him—to remain closely connected to Him.

Of course, Jesus isn't really talking about grapes here but metaphorical fruit—and that reminds me of the fruit that comes from the Holy Spirit, which includes *joy* (Galatians 5:22). Jesus' message to His disciples is that staying connected to Him (like a grape to a vine), in the grief, persecution, and trials to come will be the key to holding on to joy.

So how do we abide in Christ, especially as mothers? What does

that actually look like? When caring for young children, it can be hard to find time for reading your Bible every day (or even occasional days!), yet this remains one of the most effective ways to draw close to the Lord. I get it! Solutions aren't easy, but we'll discuss that very question throughout this book. Suffice it to say that there is more than one way to abide in Jesus and that doing so is crucial to us partaking in the joy He offers.

In John 15 Jesus teaches the disciples (and us) what it means to remain in Him and to experience the fullness of His joy. Stick with me, and I think you, too, will be struck by the logic and beauty of His teaching:

“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

JOHN 15:11

What *things*, exactly, is He referring to? Let's look at the previous verses:

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.”

JOHN 15:9-10

There's a lot to unpack in these two verses, which leads us to more questions. First, which *commandments* is Jesus talking about here?

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

JOHN 15:12

Okay, so how do we love *like Him*?

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

JOHN 15:13

And how is it possible to carry this out?

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. . . . If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

JOHN 15:4, 7

What, then, is the key to lasting joy? And how can we abide as mothers? I won't say it as well as Scripture does, but I believe that joy is rooted in laying down our lives for others out of love and obedience to God's commands through the supernatural abilities and fruitfulness that come from clinging to Christ.

And that, my friends, is one of Scripture's recipes for joy. And not just average joy—*complete* joy!

Let's return for a moment to verse 13. Laying down one's life for a friend can have multiple interpretations and applications.

First, we know that Jesus is talking about Himself as the ultimate demonstration of love—God's own Son laying down His life for the salvation of humanity. Let's refer to that as Interpretation No. 1.

Interpretation No. 2 is that the greatest demonstration of love we can make is to physically sacrifice our lives for other people. Not many of us will be asked to do this, but it bears mentioning.

Interpretation No. 3 is where many of us land, and it's where I'd like to focus: As followers of Christ, we are to follow His example

of sacrificial love. Perhaps that involves “laying down our lives” by relinquishing our personal desires for the well-being of others.

Does that sound familiar to anyone else? Motherhood, at least for me, has been a continuous journey of learning how to relinquish my own desires for the well-being of my children and my family. That means I’m right on the doorstep of joy almost every single day. Motherhood itself is an invitation from God to experience the kind of joy that comes from laying down our lives out of love for the sake of others.

I don’t know about you, but that blows my mind.

I used to think that motherhood would bring me joy because it would be *enjoyable*. And while there are many enjoyable aspects of being a mother, that’s not what brings me lasting joy. What brings me deep, lasting joy is the experience of abiding in Christ and obeying His commands—in this case, through the ongoing practice of laying down my life for my children.

What an incredible gift we’ve been offered; the very way we live and love is an instrument for experiencing true and meaningful joy.

Kristen Rusch



Joy Thief

Getting disconnected from Jesus leaves us running on fumes and unable to tap into the true source of joy.

Fight Back

How can we connect with God when we hardly have time to read the Bible? One way is to love others as He has loved us. Look for

Mothering on Empty

a way to exhibit sacrificial love for someone in your home today. Maybe it means getting up earlier to make coffee for your hubby, helping your children do something that *they* love (even if you don't), or making your family's favorite meal for dinner. Let it bring you joy!

Inspiration

Everything, if given to God, can become your gateway to joy.

ELISABETH ELLIOT¹