

WISDOM FOR
Parenting

A FIVE-WEEK
DEVOTIONAL STUDY

Sharonda Cooper


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To Alyssa

Thank you for allowing me the privilege of pouring into you what has been poured into me by faithful women of God.

May you find as much joy in mothering as I have, and may your redemption story change other women's lives as much as it has mine.

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Where relevant, Scripture quotations from the New Testament use the ESV's alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters").

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

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Contents

Introduction 7

Week 1: Wisdom for Stepping into Motherhood

Day 1: A Baby Changes Everything 11

Day 2: At His Feet 15

Day 3: Your New Job Description 19

Day 4: Relationship Matters 23

Day 5: Fear Not 27

Week 1 Discussion Questions 31

Week 2: Wisdom for When Our Children Suffer

Day 6: Before Suffering Comes 35

Day 7: Cry Out to God 39

Day 8: Present Your Complaint 43

Day 9: Boldly Ask for Deliverance 47

Day 10: Trust God's Wise Choice 51

Week 2 Discussion Questions 55

Week 3: Wisdom for When Our Children Sin

Day 11: Sinners Like Us 59

Day 12: Discipline in Love 63

Day 13: Met with Mercy	67
Day 14: Sinners in God's Hands	71
Day 15: Sovereignty and Salvation	75
<i>Week 3 Discussion Questions</i>	79

Week 4: Wisdom for Our Children's Struggles and Successes

Day 16: The Comparison Game	83
Day 17: Stacking the Deck	87
Day 18: Limited by Design	91
Day 19: The Right Kind of Success	95
Day 20: Motivating in Love	99
<i>Week 4 Discussion Questions</i>	103

Week 5: Wisdom for When Our Children Leave

Day 21: Borrowed Hearts	107
Day 22: Shooting Arrows	111
Day 23: More Fruit to Bear	115
Day 24: Wisdom Passed Down	119
Day 25: Satisfied in Christ	123
<i>Week 5 Discussion Questions</i>	127

Acknowledgments	129
Notes	131



Introduction

SOME LITTLE GIRLS dream of growing up, getting married, and becoming mothers. That wasn't me. In fact, when I headed off to MIT at the age of eighteen, I thought I'd work my way to a penthouse apartment and live a ritzy single's life with a couple of companion pets. That, however, is not what God had planned. I ended up getting married the day after I graduated with my master's degree. Five years later, I left my fancy engineering job to become a stay-at-home mom.

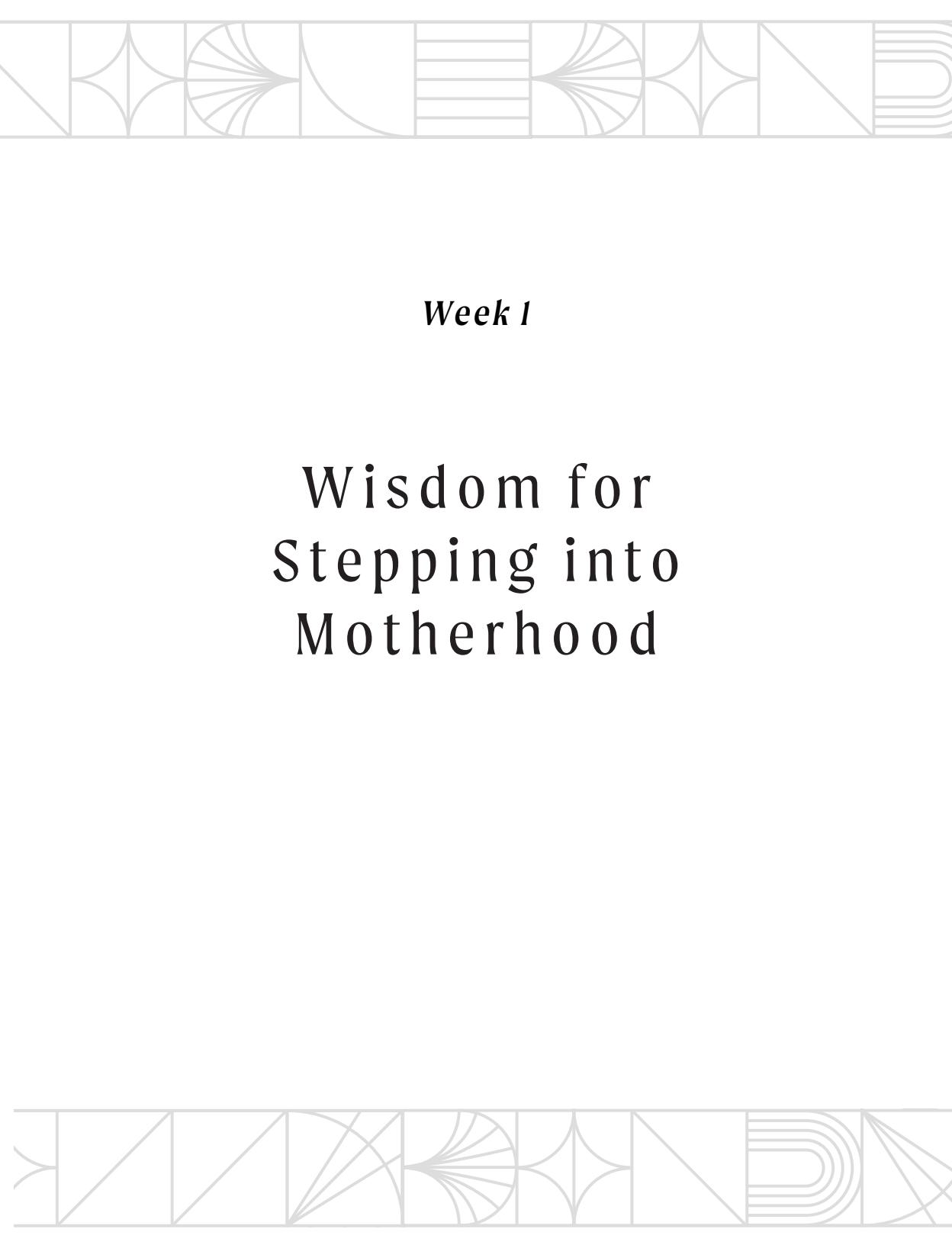
Over the years, God provided spiritual mothers and mentors who poured into my life. Shea helped me understand the importance of creating a Christ-centered home instead of a child-centered one. JoJo sat across the table from me week after week, reminding me that God had chosen me to be my kids' mom and that discipling them was the most important job I'd ever have. Carole kept God's Word before me as she gave me opportunities to teach the Bible and speak into the lives of other moms. As my kids moved into adolescence, Jeanine answered questions about discipline while reminding me to prioritize my relationships in the local church. Marilyn was there to wipe my tears as I experienced all the high school "lasts" and transitioned from parenting children in the home to parenting children at a distance. This book contains much of the wisdom they passed down to me.

Now that my children are grown, I recognize how much we mothers need God's wisdom at every step of the journey. Not only do we need wisdom to parent well, but we need it to understand our own hearts as our kids experience the highs and lows of childhood. When our kids are hurting, we need wisdom to deal with our own sadness. When our kids win, we need wisdom to celebrate their success without becoming prideful. And when our kids step out of childhood and into their future, we need wisdom to handle both grief and joy.

That said, this is not your typical parenting book. You won't find any how-to guides or strategic plans for raising successful children. Rather, this book considers the ways God changes mothers through the seasons of parenting and invites us to pursue and steward biblical wisdom in every circumstance. Each daily reading explores a brief passage of Scripture and closes with a theological principle derived from the text. The principles, which apply to all stages of mothering, will encourage you to better understand God's ways and trust his goodness.

My hope is that you will use this book in three ways. First, I hope that it will be a devotional tool to help you think deeply about how God strengthens our faith through mothering. Second, I hope you will use it in a small group setting to cultivate relationships with other moms as you learn and grow together. Finally, I hope that you will use this book to disciple a younger woman as she experiences the joys and struggles of motherhood. You might consider reading it now and later returning to topics as they apply or when a friend is interested in working through one of the weeks with you.

May God grant you his wisdom, sister, as you parent your children, and may you grow in godliness as you turn your eyes to Christ in each season of mothering.



Week 1

Wisdom for Stepping into Motherhood

Day 1

A Baby Changes Everything

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. (Ps. 139:13–15)

WHEN WE ARRIVED at the birthing center on a sunny April morning in 2004, I never expected to go home without a baby. But, due to breathing complications, our daughter spent a few nights in the neonatal intensive care unit. Leaving her at the hospital made me feel helpless, but now I know that those challenging days were the first of many parenting seasons God would use to shape and mold me.

Becoming a mother truly changed everything. There was new love in our home and in my heart for this wonderful little person God had knit together in my womb. There was new joy in the wonder of God's work of creating human life. And there was new understanding of

God's sovereignty—even before she was made, God knew my baby and had already planned who she would become. She was a miracle, and I was so grateful to be her mommy.

There were other changes too. I had new desires—like wanting to be with her all the time so I'd never miss a new skill or facial expression. I also had newfound concerns about everything from my car's reliability to our city's public safety ranking. All of a sudden, life was just *different*.

Amid the frenzy of a world turned upside down by the arrival of a baby, it can be difficult to remember that we too are created and seen by God. We might love every minute of being a new mom, or we might be so sleep-deprived that we mix up the days of the week. Or, in the midst of running errands, we might realize we haven't showered or eaten yet. On a hard day, if we're honest, we might secretly long to return to an earlier stage of life when the responsibilities weren't so all-encompassing, when we had more time to just sit and think about who we were and what we wanted out of life.

Today's text prompts us to remember that the same sovereign hands that wove our baby together created us too. We, too, are fearfully and wonderfully made. And, although being a mom is an important new part of our lives, it's not our primary source of worth and value. God has plans for us far beyond diaper changes, late-night feedings, and doctors' appointments. If we know Jesus, our identity is not in motherhood—it's in Christ (see Gal. 2:20).

In her book *Identity Theft*, Melissa Kruger writes, "Our identity in Christ is a fixed anchor guiding us through the changing seasons and circumstances of our lives as women. We're not primarily defined by our college degree, marital status, the number of children we have,

A Baby Changes Everything

where we live, or the work we do. It's our identity in Christ that shapes every aspect of our lives.”¹ When we believed the gospel, our lives were hidden with Christ in God (see Col. 3:3), and we received acceptance and love apart from anything we do (including motherhood). This identity, rooted in our union with the Savior, is now (and always will be) the most important thing about us.

This season of raising children is *part* of our story, but it's not the whole story. Babies eventually become adults, and although we'll always be mothers, our daily lives won't always revolve around the needs of our children. So, we need something more lasting to hold on to.

When we place our identity in something that can be lost, taken, or changed, it will eventually lead to devastation. So, instead, let's ground our identity in Christ. We are beloved daughters of the King, and even if having a baby changes everything else, it doesn't change that.

Wisdom Principle

Our identity is in Christ—not mothering.

Reflection Questions

1. What biblical wisdom does Psalm 139 provide for understanding your worth and value as a beloved daughter of God?

1. Introduction to *Identity Theft: Reclaiming the Truth of Who We Are in Christ*, ed. Melissa Kruger (The Gospel Coalition, 2018), 4.

2. In what ways have you been tempted to find your worth or identity in your role as a mother? What would it look like for you to find your identity in Christ alone?
3. Parenting can bring lots of joy, but some days are challenging. What comfort do you find in knowing that even your difficult days as a parent have been formed by God (see Ps. 139:16)?

Day 2

At His Feet

But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:41–42)

MARTHA ALWAYS GETS the bad rap in this story. But there she was, just trying to tend to houseguests and a myriad of to-dos while her sister Mary enjoyed time with the visiting Savior (see Luke 10:38–39). Maybe we can relate—it’s easy for moms to be Marthas too. With children in the home, the list of chores often seems endless. We sometimes fear that if we don’t hit the ground running once the alarm clock sounds, hope for a successful day is all but lost. Because so much of our work around the home seems indispensable, we might be tempted to dismiss Jesus’s words to Martha as inapplicable to our season of life. But this passage provides wisdom that applies to every stage of mothering.

This story is strategically placed just after Jesus tells the parable of the good Samaritan. We see that Martha’s diligent service made her a good neighbor, like the Samaritan. But unlike the Samaritan, she was “anxious and troubled” (v. 41). Martha’s *heart*—not her actions—needed correction.

Martha's chores weren't *unimportant*. The party needed a host, and people needed food. Jesus simply pointed out that Martha should have prioritized *fellowship*. Mary had made a better choice by cherishing time with Jesus and making room for it amidst the busyness. In our own myriad of responsibilities, how can we imitate Mary's devotion instead of Martha's anxious striving? Let's ask ourselves a few questions.

First, how do we think about time with Jesus? Bible reading need not become another chore on the to-do list—it is the pathway to deepening our relationship with Christ and finding grace amid life's challenges. Reading a psalm in the morning and meditating on God's character can shift our perspective on what might be a daunting day ahead. Ending a busy evening with Scripture can provide peace and comfort as we head into sleep. Jesus wants to provide quiet rest amid the hustle and bustle of our lives, so he invites us to his Word. There we can find daily bread to live another day.

Second, what creative ways can we find to "sit at the Lord's feet" in the midst of our busy days? At times, it might be difficult to get alone for Bible reading and prayer, and waking up earlier than the family may not always be a manageable option. But this is when we can try things like listening to an audio Bible while doing household chores, practicing a catechism while driving, or even reviewing memory verses while in the shower!

Third, what is realistic for us? Writing to busy people struggling to carve out time for Bible reading, Don Whitney says, "Do what you can."¹ This means we can stop comparing ourselves to one another

1. Donald S. Whitney, *Simplify Your Spiritual Life: Spiritual Disciplines for the Overwhelmed* (NavPress, 2003), 157.

At His Feet

and instead rely on the Holy Spirit to help us prioritize time with God according to our own rhythms and needs. It means rejecting the lie that a few short minutes of Bible reading isn't enough to matter. And it means remembering that God accepts even our feeblest attempts at communing with him. He delights in our offering—however small it might be—and his mercy and grace invite us to come as we are.

Time with Jesus is an investment with great eternal value. Christ laid down his life for us, reconciling us to God (see 2 Cor. 5:18) so that we might enjoy communion with him—even in our busiest seasons. Mary wasn't better than her sister, and Jesus certainly wasn't rebuking Martha for doing her chores. Instead, he recognized that Martha's busyness was affecting her heart, so he redirected her gaze and lovingly showed her a better way. Maybe he's offering the same to you today. Let's choose the good portion—the life-giving fellowship of the Lord Jesus Christ that can never be taken away (see Luke 10:42).

Wisdom Principle

Our hearts are blessed when we spend time with Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you think about time in God's Word? Is it a chore? Do you look forward to it? Does it drain you or energize you? Does it help you fight sin?

2. How does this passage help you understand the priority of time with Jesus amid the many tasks of mothering?
3. What suggestions from today's devotional might you apply to strengthen your spiritual life? Pray that God would give you such reliance on him that you long for the Scriptures every day.

Day 3

Your New Job Description

Hear, O Israel: The **LORD** our God, the **LORD** is one. You shall love the **LORD** your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. (Deut. 6:4–7)

WHEN MY CHILDREN WERE TODDLERS, I interviewed one set of parents for each of three schooling options: one public, one private Christian, and one homeschool. All three offered the same wisdom: “No matter where your kids go to school, you’re their primary teacher.” Me? A teacher? According to the career aptitude test I took in high school, *teacher* was not a viable profession for someone like me. I lacked the patience and creativity to teach anyone anything! But my friends weren’t talking about teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic. They meant that parents are responsible for making sure

children learn what life is really about; above all else, I needed to teach my kids about God, and if I was going to do that with any success, I needed to know him better myself.

The Israelites knew the importance of teaching their children God's Word. Today's passage, an essential text in Jewish liturgy, reminds parents to love the one true God and train their children to love him too. Known as the Shema, this declaration of faith offers practical instruction for all parents who strive to pass God's commands to the next generation.

Although we may not literally bind God's commands "as a sign" (Deut. 6:8) on our hands or "write them on the doorposts" of our houses (v. 9), we can find other ways to immerse our families in Scripture. This might look like reciting a short psalm together before breakfast, playing hymns in the background during playtime, or praying out loud while taking an afternoon walk. If your children are young, you might try practicing memory verse songs or acting out Bible stories after dinner. Bedtime is also a great opportunity for reading Scripture and talking about the blessings and challenges of the day. As we pursue behaviors like these, we will naturally begin to weave God's Word into the normal rhythms of family life.

In the New Testament, Jesus affirmed the Shema's command to love the Lord and combined it with a reference to the book of Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31; see also Luke 10:27). But which of us truly and consistently loves in this way? We don't love God perfectly, nor do we love other people—including our kids—as we should. Christ is the only one who loves God with absolute devotion and loves others with perfect selflessness. And he is *in* us and *with* us as we press into the task of daily discipleship.

We are empowered by God to pass our faith down to our children, but even our most fervent and skillful teaching can't guarantee their salvation. The Holy Spirit alone causes us to trust in Christ and receive his perfect righteousness. So, as we continually expose our children to God's Word, we rely on the Spirit to shape our instruction and deepen our own understanding of the Lord. We entrust ourselves to him. We ask him to work through us. And we ardently pray that *he* would give our kids ears to hear his promises and faith to believe they're true.

Mom, you've been given a gift. Whether your children are babies in your arms or adults living outside your home, you have an opportunity to teach them God's ways. That starts by knowing God deeply for yourself and cherishing his words in your heart, as we looked at yesterday. Then, simply let your love for him flow out to your children. Be on the lookout for ways you can weave what you're learning about God's will and ways into your normal activities. As moms, we can share lessons that adorn our children's lives like "a graceful garland" and "pendants" around their necks, shaping them in the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:9; see also vv. 7–8). What a beautiful calling to embrace!

Wisdom Principle

God calls us, and the Spirit empowers us, to teach the ways of Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. Why is it important to love God with all our heart, soul, and might? What are some ways you can cultivate a deeper love for the Lord?

2. Does teaching come naturally to you, or is it a struggle? What practical tips do today's verses provide for teaching your children to love God?
3. Faithfully teaching your children about God does not guarantee their salvation. Why is this passage still important for every Christian mother?