

“Hilary’s compassionate heart for homemakers who are living in the tension of keeping a tidy home while trying to maintain an eternal perspective shines through the pages of this book. Hilary’s words—and, more importantly, the Scripture she weaves throughout this book—will be a balm to every tired homemaker who has struggled with feeling like she just can’t keep things tidy.”

—**Erin Odom**, founder of The Humbled Homemaker® and author of *More Than Just Making It* and *You Can Stay Home with Your Kids!*

“As Christian women, we dwell in an in-between land. On the one hand, we desire our home to be a place of rest and rejuvenation for our family, filled with peaceful and beautiful things. On the other hand, we can struggle with idolizing the perfect home and chasing after the Instagram-worthy house of our dreams that’s just too far out of our budget. Hilary gets straight to the heart of this tightrope walk with relatable stories, biblical wisdom, and godly advice. Are you longing for a peaceful, tidy home? Hilary shares how to best accomplish this with true rest and beauty.”

—**Jami Balmet**, creator of Finding Joy in Your Home and author of the Finding Joy in Your Kitchen cookbook series

“As a homeschooling, work-from-home mom of three, I resonate with the struggle of wanting to keep a tidy house but always falling short. This book is a gift to all those like me. It holds out freedom and joy to women who’ve strived not only to have a tidy house but to present a tidy, perfect life to those around us. Hilary reminds us what truly matters in *The Tension of Tidy*.”

—**Christie Thomas**, author of *Little Habits*, *Big Faith* and *Fruit Full*

“In the nitty-gritty of our everyday lives, *The Tension of Tidy* helps us recognize this difficult but undeniable truth: *Perfectionism equals grace rejection*. Through Scripture and story, Hilary serves as our

candid-yet-kind guide to receiving and resting in God’s comfort—in our homes, our hearts, and our relationships.”

—**Cheri Gregory**, coauthor of *You Don’t Have to Try So Hard* and *Overwhelmed*

“Most every woman deals daily with tension caused by the demands and expectations of home, work, family, and just living life! But warmly—with relatable anecdotes, practical inspiration, and biblical encouragement—Hilary Bernstein guides us to take all that tension we’re so good at clenching and release it to our grace- and peace- and joy-giving heavenly Father.”

—**JoAnne Simmons**, author of *The Overthinker’s Devotional*

“The description of Hilary’s college dorm room captured my attention, and I plunged in to read more about this burden-filled journey we call *perfection*. Her passion to direct women to the Lord and his written Word is evident, allowing her readers to recognize there is genuine freedom in Christ. The Tension Tamers in each chapter provide an opportunity for the practical application of truth to our hearts and lives.”

—**Brenda McCord**, founder of Discover God’s Truth Ministries and cohost of the *Walk with God* podcast

# the tension of tidy

Uncovering God's Perfect Grace  
for Your Imperfect Space

Hilary Bernstein

*FOREWORD BY ASHERITAH CIUCIU*



*The Tension of Tidy: Uncovering God's Perfect Grace for Your Imperfect Space*

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*For all my amazing sisters in Christ  
who feel weighed down by  
the pressure of perfection.*



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# Foreword

WHAT COMES TO mind when you hear the word *tidy*?

As a mom to three young kids, I immediately picture our living room floor—strewn with building blocks, books, dress-up clothes, and probably a few hidden candy wrappers too. Definitely the opposite of tidy.

To be fair, it's not just the kids. As I type these words, my husband is working to repair a plumbing leak that led to a massive hole in our kitchen ceiling. My desk is littered with Post-It notes, books, bills, and random papers to be filed. And I'm pretty sure there's a laundry basket of clean clothes upstairs just waiting to be folded and put away.

No matter how many cleaning systems we implement or how many “cleanup sprints” we attempt as a family, our home bears witness to the second law of thermodynamics—without constant intervention, our environment tends to devolve toward chaos and disorder.

It's easy to become envious when social media displays perfectly curated homes. It's easy to become resentful when others leave messes behind. It's easy to become snippy when we just want the stainless fridge to stay streak-free for more than an hour, thank-you-very-much.

But in those moments, I'm reminded that Jesus never asked me to keep a picture-perfect home. He does, however, invite me—and

you—to abide in him, to receive his love, and to live out his love toward others, even in our imperfect spaces.

The Bible tells us that Jesus, the Son of God, left the realm of glory to come to this dusty, dirty, and disheveled world, to dwell among us—literally, to “pitch his tent” in our midst (see John 1:14–18). If ever there was someone entitled to complain about the conditions he was living in, it was Jesus. But he didn’t. Instead, he entered imperfect spaces to welcome imperfect people to encounter his perfect loving presence.

And encountering Jesus changes everything, even how we tend our homes so that other people may encounter him there. That’s why I’m grateful for the book you hold in your hands.

I’ve known Hilary for more than a decade now. We’ve dreamed of books together, we’ve watched our kids grow up together, and we’ve served in our local church together. We’ve been in each other’s homes, both for sumptuous feasts and for simple cookouts. And when my family moved out of our newlywed home, Hilary’s husband helped us paint over the sunshiny-yellow and berry-blue colors that would have never graced the pages of a magazine. But not once did I feel they judged us for our colorful walls or thrifted furniture.

So I can tell you: Hilary lives out what she teaches. She doesn’t just offer quick tips for a cleaner home; she actually opens her life to share real stories of her own personal struggles in this area. And more importantly, she shares how God transformed her—and continues to grow her—in the areas of tidiness, hospitality, and a gracious heart.

In *The Tension of Tidy*, Hilary invites us to embrace the beauty of imperfection and discover God’s grace in our messy, imperfect spaces. With a blend of warmth, relatability, and unwavering hope, she gently reminds us that our worth isn’t measured by the cleanliness of our homes but by the love and grace of our heavenly Father.

So grab a cup of coffee or your favorite tea, and settle in. Let Hilary guide you as a dear friend, reminding you that in the tension of tidy, God’s grace is ever-present.

I'm cheering you on as you invite God's creative Spirit to bring order and beauty to your chaos—inside and out.

With much joy,

**Asheritah Ciucu**

Author of *Delighting in Jesus* and *Prayers of REST*



## A Surprising Beginning

AN ODD ASSORTMENT of 1970s and '80s pop music from a local radio station blared from my bedside alarm clock, waking me from another night of sleep. After mentally singing along with the words, I hit the snooze button and rolled over, eyes wide open. It was morning, and I was fully aware I had more things to do today than the day had hours. I might have felt rested, but I did not want to get up.

My thoughts swirled around my circumstances. I had too much to do. I knew it, deep down. I listed the growing number of things I needed to get done at work today. I thought through the appointments I needed to make for my kids, and the important life lessons I should be teaching them. I couldn't forget to stop at the store to pick up the ingredients for a salad I promised to take to a potluck. I wondered when I'd fit in the time to visit my parents or take the dog to the vet.

After I hit the snooze button again, my mental to-do list for my family's home entered the picture. The kitchen floor looked filthy yesterday, and I needed to fit in some time to mop it. Mopping probably wouldn't be enough though—there were some spots that definitely needed some scrubbing on my hands and knees. That just couldn't happen today. Maybe tomorrow? Or this weekend? And my husband and I needed to talk about whether to call a plumber about the outdoor faucet, but I knew he was stressed over a work meeting. Would next

week or next month be a better time to bring the topic up? It's not like we had the money set aside for that repair anyway.

My alarm went off again, and I finally climbed out of bed to start my day, even though I felt I had already lived it out in my imagination. This was becoming a daily occurrence, before I opened my Bible, poured myself a cup of coffee, hopped in the shower, made my bed, or even made it out of bed. Every morning I woke up thinking through the commitments, opportunities, and chores that lay ahead in my day and in my home. And every morning I got out of bed feeling defeated by all the tension.

When my friends and I got together in our spare time, we'd catch up about families and work and life, then we'd start to scratch the surface of how we felt about our homes. We were tired. Even though each of us were completely aware of every task that was necessary, we still felt unable to get started. No matter what we actually accomplished, it was never enough. Exhaustion, overwhelm, stress, and failure never went away. Sometimes we could block them out with the sheer amount of busyness in life, but they always found a way to resurface, like a mole that unfortunately and blindly scurries into a swimming pool during the night. (Is my family's pool the only place this happens? Each summer I'm familiar with this unfortunate demise, as I regularly end up as the mole scooper.)

### Facing the Tension of Tidy

One day, as my literary agent Barb and I caught up about life and she asked how I was *really* doing, all the work pressures, family pressures, and home pressures that were building up inside came tumbling out in my words. I was struggling. And come to think of it, every single friend of mine was too.

Wisely, Barb challenged me that *this* was what I should write a book about: all the struggles women face in their homes every single day. I thought it was a fantastic idea for a book—for someone else to write.

At that moment, I wanted to *read* a book that would give me advice, encouragement, and biblical instruction. I wasn't so sure I wanted to remind myself about the homemaking defeat I lived in every day, pore over it some more, and then write about it. We ended our conversation with an agreement to pray about the idea.

Pray I did, asking God to give me insight and guidance in an area of life where I felt I was completely in over my head. The Lord did answer my prayers, and after I pondered this subject for a couple of weeks, I noticed that I lived with a lot more clarity and direction than I'd realized.

First of all, I recognized there are so many culprits behind the tensions we feel when it comes to our homes: our cultures, our families, our possessions, and ourselves, just to name a few. Whether we realize it or not, some of the tensions come from outside sources that we can't control. Other tensions, internal ones, run much deeper. While the pressures and influences that come from external sources are strong and can intensify when we least expect them to, sometimes those internal expectations and stressors are infinitely worse. Unfortunately, we are often our own worst enemies.

Sometimes the tensions themselves don't seem that intense, at least from the outside looking in. What *is* intense are the ways we internalize and amplify certain issues until they overwhelm us. So many external pressures from the world and internal tensions from ourselves have uncanny ways of pushing us toward feelings of failure and discouragement. Instead of recognizing and celebrating the wins that happen in our homes, we're left mentally bullying ourselves, thinking we need to do more and be more.

All the tension can feel like a taut rope wrapping around us, making it hard to move or even breathe. But there's a way to cut this strangehold and free ourselves. That freedom can be found in the sword of the Spirit, better known as the Word of God. God directed me to truths in the Bible—especially in the Psalms—that are just as timely

and effective right now as when they were first written thousands of years ago. I recognized that they could help us deal with our universal feelings of frustration and exhaustion.

Once I identified the main tensions when it comes to homemaking, as well as relevant scriptural principles, I thought through my years of trial and error in my home. All my mistakes and victories had helped me figure out practical ways to manage my home in the middle of the unpredictability of life. I knew what boosted my confidence and motivated me. I was familiar with what worked well and what fizzled miserably.

Throughout this entire time of praying and pondering, I experienced the beauty and peace of God's grace as he gently reminded me that my worth wasn't found in what my home looked like or how much I could or could not accomplish. And that, dear reader, is how *The Tension of Tidy* began.

### Meeting the Founder of Homes

Really, though, *The Tension of Tidy* has its true origin all the way back at the beginning of the Bible. You see, there we learn why we care so much about our homes, as well as the reason why caring for them is filled with so much tension.

God created the earth and everything in it, including the first man and woman. He created a home for them as well, and it was good. As Genesis 2:7–9 recounts,

Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.

Before he created Eve, the woman, the Lord planted a garden and



put the man, Adam, there to live. And how did he furnish this garden? With every tree that was “pleasant to the sight and good for food.” Imagine a lush, beautiful garden laden with food—that sounds a lot like a well-stocked kitchen in a home. After that, the Lord saw that it wasn’t good for man to be alone (see verse 18), so he took the man’s rib and formed a woman (see verses 21–22). That woman was created in the garden home. She became the man’s companion and helped him care for their perfect home.

Unfortunately, as you and I know from the minute-to-minute tensions we face, the world didn’t stay perfect. Humanity’s flawless beginning took a tragic turn—the man and woman believed Satan’s lies and disobeyed God (see 3:1–7). Part of the punishment and curse their sin brought into the world was the new reality that their home would no longer be a perfect space:

Cursed is the ground because of you;  
With hard labor you shall eat from it  
All the days of your life.  
Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;  
Yet you shall eat the plants of the field;  
By the sweat of your face  
You shall eat bread,  
Until you return to the ground,  
Because from it you were taken;  
For you are dust,  
And to dust you shall return.

(verses 17–19 NASB)

This is why you and I both live every single day in a world—and in homes—filled with troubles and toil. It’s the reason I start my days trying to figure out how to squeeze in all I’m convinced I need to do. It’s the reason we try so hard to jump through hoop after hoop in our

homes, spurred on by unintentional and intentional pressures from so many sources. Stop for a moment and imagine: What would your life and home and job look and feel like today if nothing on earth had ever fallen from the very good condition that God created them in?

Although we can never go back to Eden and the perfect home and life we lost, the good news is there is something promising ahead of us. Just like the Bible begins with a picture of dwelling in a perfect home, it ends with this picture too. At the end of the Bible, in Revelation 21:1–4, we're given a hint of what this future, forever home will be like:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Aside from being beautifully adorned, this forever home centers on who will dwell there: God. He will dwell with his people. Just like Adam and Eve weren't alone in the garden, we won't be alone in our new home. God himself will dwell with us!

Did you notice what *won't* be there? No more crying, dying, or pain. No more sin. No more tension. They will all pass away.

### Soaking in God's Perfect Grace

Scripture's principles are much more promising and helpful than popular, pithy sayings we're inundated with daily. For every catchy phrase

that encourages us to do more, be more, work harder, or make things happen in our own strength, the Bible is brimming with grace-filled reminders. Instead of making us feel like we need to wear ourselves out trying harder, God's truth ministers to us in our deepest parts. It gets to the root of things. It speaks to our hearts. Throughout this book, we'll dive into the Bible for truth that can comfort us and set us free from the intense tensions we feel as we attempt to care for our homes. As I share stories and tips that work for me and my family, I'll also offer Tension Tamers along the way—reflection questions, practical advice, and helpful challenges.

Just like with our homes, sometimes you need to make a mess before things can get cleaner. Some tensions, like certain rooms in our homes, might seem messier than others, but by the end of this journey together, we'll experience freedom that only comes from the Lord. As we turn to the truth of God's Word and begin to internalize and live out his timeless principles, we'll uncover his perfect grace for our imperfect spaces.



## *Chapter 1*

# Perfection

PERFECT. AFTER ARRANGING a throw pillow just so and adjusting the area rug in a particular way, my dorm room looked flawless. Everything was in its proper place.

I labored for this sort of perfection as a college student in a teensy, tiny dorm room, of all places. Instead of spending all my free time hanging out with friends or watching TV or studying a little harder, I made sure my room was immaculate.

Fast-forward twenty-five years, and I was living the life I only dreamed about back in college—married with children and a dog, coming home to a cozy bungalow in a cutesy neighborhood—but my house was far from perfect.

To be clear, most of my house was in pretty good shape. If you walked through my front door at any time and inspected my living room, dining room, kitchen, and bathroom, you probably would have considered my home to be very tidy. And if my younger college-student self could have seen it, she would have had to admit that although it wasn't as spotless as her dorm room, it was still surprisingly clean considering an actual busy family lived in it.

But shut away behind closed doors in my basement, there was a

disastrous wreck. A lot like Monica in *Friends* with her horribly cluttered closet, I didn't let people into this space of towering stuff. I even avoided going there myself, unless I absolutely had to. I had a vague idea of where things might be stored, but I didn't want to set aside a huge chunk of time to go find something in that room. And the thought of a purging process? It was overwhelming. I doubted I'd ever have enough time to tackle that disaster, so I dealt with it the only way I could think of: I shut the door. Out of sight, out of mind, right?

Only the situation felt more like out of sight, *heavy* on my mind. I imagined that if I unexpectedly died in my sleep, my husband, kids, parents, and friends would be stuck dealing with that oppressive storage space, asking themselves when was the last time I had listened to my cassette tapes from the nineties or wondering why in the world I owned so many different cookie cutters if I only baked cutout cookies at Christmas.

I might've only walked into that mess of a storage room a couple of times a week, but I always had it on my mind. And that mess made me feel awful. No matter how clean I tried to keep the rest of my house or how hard I worked to get to the dishes and laundry each day, I still felt the suffocating weight of that imperfection. Instead of celebrating the fact that I managed to keep the livable part of my home relatively clean, even with kids and pets, I couldn't ever shake the nagging feeling that my house wasn't clean, just because of that one room.

As much as I wanted that basement room cleaned—a desire fueled by my drive for perfection—I also only had so much time and energy each day. And I never seemed to have enough to tackle that storage space. (In recent years, God has helped me deal with the clutter of that room in some unexpected ways. Now it's much less of a burden, but I'll share more of that story in upcoming chapters.)

Even though I fully grasp how limited my time is and how fleeting my energy is, part of me still wants every single nook and cranny of my home, basement, and garage to be spotless and organized. That's utterly

ridiculous! And yet, as a woman *without* obsessive-compulsive disorder, I continually wrestle with this picture of perfection for my home. I feel deflated when all the spaces and places in my home are *not* perfect like my teensy college dorm room used to be. I often ponder how I can better manage this delicate balance of caring for my home and living the life the Lord's given me—without feeling defeated day after day.

The tension of perfection comes when we grasp the truth that our time, energy, and funds have realistic limits, yet we still find ourselves drawn to the fallacy that we need to keep homes that are fit to grace the pages of a magazine or feature on a home improvement show. The tension gets even worse when we saddle ourselves with guilt whenever we can't meet our ideal expectations or live up to society's impossible standard of perfect homes that are beautifully decorated and immaculately maintained.

You may enjoy cleaning and prefer a tidy home. Or maybe messiness is part of who you are. Regardless of your preferred tendency for tidiness, we all face pressure when it comes to caring for our homes. Where do these invisible, impossible standards come from? And how do we break free?

### Embracing the Goodness of Work

Every homemaker knows a home doesn't take care of itself—not even a perfect one. There is always work to be done to manage and maintain our belongings. As much as we may wish it were otherwise, it has been like this since the beginning. Let's take a closer look at the story of creation in Genesis.

The original bachelor pad, the comfortable haven of Eden was not just something for man to enjoy—he was also responsible for tending it. Genesis 2:15 reveals, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” Before there was sin and before there was a curse, man was set in this beautiful, fruitful garden and charged with caring for it.

Just like today's gardens require a lot of time, attention, and hard work, the first garden would've required much effort. Imagine what pre-fall, pre-flood gardening might have included! Most likely this first gardener would've tended to the soil, nurtured seedlings, pruned plants, and harvested fruit. Even without the constant annoyances of weeds and destructive pests, drought, or flooding, he still would've needed to tend to many continual garden chores.

When God saw that it wasn't good for man to be alone, he made woman and she joined the man in the work of caring for their garden home. And that wasn't all they were responsible for:

Then God said, "Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the livestock and over all the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls on the earth." So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.  
(1:26–27 NASB)

From the beginning, it's clear that work was an essential part of God's original plan for humanity. How do we know this? Genesis 1:31 explains, "God saw everything that he had made"—that includes humanity's assignments to keep the garden and rule over the earth—"and behold, it was very good."

Amazingly, even in perfect Eden, there was work to be done—and that was good!

### Acknowledging the Tension of Homemaking

Although homes—and the work of caring for them—were part of God's perfectly created world, we all are painfully aware that we don't live in that unfallen world of perfection. Our earthly lives will always be stuck between the first, perfect home God made for humans that's



described in Genesis and the second, perfect home he promises in Revelation to those who believe in Christ. We're surrounded by imperfection everywhere we look, and our lives, homes, relationships, and work all are caught in a relentless tug-of-war battle between the good they were created to be and the broken versions that sin has created.

On the one hand, we realize that homes are good. They're a part of God's purpose and plan, and we can appreciate them and thank God for his good gifts. Making our homes into lovely havens of rest and relaxation can be very good. After all, God is the Master Artist. He created beauty, and he created humans to have an eye for it. Our desires to surround ourselves with beautiful things can be good as long as they glorify God and fill us with gratitude.

On the other hand, once we cross over to obsessing about—or dare I say idolizing—the homes of our dreams, we've gone too far. When we notice our quest for beautiful things in our homes has started stealing our joy or adoration for God, that's a sign we need to dial things back.

Just as fixating on our furnishings and finishing touches elevates our homes to positions they were never meant to hold in our minds, obsessing over the cleanliness of our homes creates a false aspiration of flawlessness.

Many of us, whether we realize it or not, seek validation of our worth in how we keep our homes. We believe that if the places where we live look or feel perfect, we must be doing our proper duty. Yet there's absolutely nothing biblical about this perspective. Contrary to popular belief, we'll never find the phrase "Cleanliness is next to godliness" anywhere in the Bible. It's simply a trite saying someone made up and a lot of people like to quote. Still, many homemakers wrestle with unrealistic expectations of perfectly tidy homes and believe that the cleanliness of our homes somehow reflects our worth or even our holiness.

I can assure you that a godly life has absolutely nothing to do with the state of your home.

Yes, God is a God of order, as 1 Corinthians 14:33 (NIV) reveals. And if we're good stewards of the many gifts he's entrusted to us (see 1 Peter 4:10), we will faithfully care for our homes. But our righteousness does not depend on our cleaning habits.

Whether we succeed or fail in meeting the standards we establish in our own minds of what a perfect home is, we need to remember that the pressures and expectations don't define us. Judging and bullying ourselves with self-defeat and self-loathing isn't healthy, and it isn't biblical. The apostle Paul called believers to "work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. Remember . . . the Master you are serving is Christ" (Colossians 3:23–24 NLT). But working for the Lord doesn't mean you put yourself down or work yourself to the point of exhaustion day after day, week after week.

We also need to understand that working as though it's for the *Lord* isn't the same as working for amazing *stuff*. Are you adding stress to your workload just because you're trying to buy or maintain certain belongings? Is your quest for a room that looks exactly like something you saw on TV stealing your rest and peace of mind?

In fact, seeking perfection in our homes ends up being a cheap replacement for the Lord. A substitute picture of perfection has been drilled into our subconscious our entire lives: a flawlessness that we've internalized from our modern, materialistic culture. We've been disciplined by our society to find our identity and satisfaction in our belongings and homes, yet those material belongings keep us far from our true identity and source of satisfaction: our Savior. If we notice that we're completely trusting in ourselves to make things happen around our homes—trusting in our own inspiration, or the money we're spending on renovations, or how good our homes make us feel—it's time to take a breather and get a fresh perspective.

## Enjoying the Gift of Dwelling Places

While the Bible ends with a picture of God dwelling with humans in the book of Revelation, descriptions and promises of dwelling with him now are sprinkled throughout the Bible, particularly in the Psalms. As poetic prayers set smack-dab in the middle of the Bible, the psalms are songs of joy and grief, pleasure and pain. Just as the psalms teach us how we can safely express our emotions in God's presence, their timeless wisdom also helps us gather an accurate, biblical perspective on our imperfect homes.

Over and over, we can read the Psalms and learn about what it means to dwell *in* the Lord and *with* the Lord. As we dwell with him here and now, we can experience his perfect grace and peace that's so refreshing and restful compared with the tensions we face.

Before we consider the details of dwelling with the Lord, though, what exactly does it mean to  *dwell* ? Several Hebrew words are translated in our English Bibles as "dwell." They carry the meanings of remaining, abiding, settling down, residing, staying, and inhabiting. Consider this residing, settling down, and abiding when you read Bible verses like what Moses shared in Psalm 90:1: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations," or the words of Psalm 91:1: "Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty" (NIV). As we dwell with our heavenly Father here in our earthly lives, we can remain in his house (see 27:4), ever singing his praise (see 84:4) and abiding in his presence (see 140:13).

We can soak in and appreciate this opportunity to dwell, remain, or stay in a relationship with the Lord as we live this temporary, earthly life and anticipate a permanent, eternal life that's yet to come. Just like he created homes on earth in the first place, our heavenly Father also established a plan so that those who believe in his Son will one day dwell in his heavenly home. Right now, though, we can also recognize the blessing of what it means to dwell in actual, physical homes. Here

on earth, God intends for people to dwell in homes so we're not left as wandering vagabonds. Our homes are merciful gifts from him.

## Building Our Homes

One of the first passages that opened my eyes to the homemaking wisdom for our actual, physical homes was Psalm 127:1–2:

Unless the LORD builds the house,  
those who build it labor in vain.  
Unless the LORD watches over the city,  
the watchman stays awake in vain.  
It is in vain that you rise up early  
and go late to rest,  
eating the bread of anxious toil;  
for he gives to his beloved sleep.

As we dig into these two verses, let's consider the first three words of this psalm: *Unless the Lord*. We need to know that *unless the Lord* does the work, our attempts will be empty, without purpose, and useless. When we leave the Lord out of the picture and try to build our homes with only our own energy, expertise, and strength, our efforts will lack so much. Unless the Lord is doing a good work in your home, housework and chores can make you feel like you're suffering through an endless uphill battle.

It's a striking conditional statement: Unless the Lord is actively involved, you won't get the results you'd like. Unless he builds your house, you'll work and work and work without a preferable outcome.

Keep in mind that this psalm was written by Solomon, someone who personally experienced the Lord's way of building a house. The book of 1 Kings includes an account of Solomon's twenty-year building process for both his palace and the Lord's temple (see chapters

6–10). The stones were prepared at a quarry. Wood covered the interior so no stones were seen. Then the inside of the house of the Lord was overlaid with pure gold. And through the Lord’s blessing, world rulers sent Solomon riches and treasures like gold and precious stones. First Kings 10:23–25 tells us:

King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. Every one of them brought his present, articles of silver and gold, garments, myrrh, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year.

Only the Lord could have lavished so many blessings on the spectacular building project. As a result of seeing this extravagant provision throughout his life and his kingly reign, Solomon was able to attest that unless the Lord had been building his house, those who constructed it would’ve labored in vain. On his own, Solomon would’ve labored in vain.

If the Lord is the one who’s central to our work, does that mean we have permission to be lazy? Do we have an excuse to stop trying and expect the Lord to do everything? Of course not. The God of the universe is not a magician or a mystical butler who will instantly make the work around our homes disappear. We shouldn’t come to him with a hope or expectation for *Abracadabra! Shazam!* All your housework mysteriously completed in an instant!

Our homes will not be cleaned as effortlessly as pulling a rabbit out of a hat. We must still do the work. And, most likely, the work will be hard. But that hard work is biblical. As Psalm 128:2 tells us, “You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.” There’s no getting around it—the “labor of your hands” will be laborious.

Yes, hard work is essential, both in everyday life and in your home. But *trusting* in your own efforts and hard work will sabotage the way you can invite the Lord to build, establish, and do his good work. As Lydia Brownback explains in her book *Sing a New Song*, “Depending on God is no call to passivity; to the contrary, the wisdom of Solomon calls us to be proactive in living out our callings and performing our daily tasks. So the work is ours; however, the success of our work is not. The outcome of all we do lies completely in the hands of God.”<sup>1</sup>

What is useless, empty, and vain? Laboring *without* the Lord. Waking up at the crack of dawn to get ahead with tasks and chores or staying up late at night working and working around your home out of fear and distrust, believing that it’s all up to you.

## Tension Tamer

**Think about the frustration you feel when you consider different chores or aspects around your home. Are you trying to solve these problems with your own resourcefulness, a clever tip you discovered online, or new strategies you heard about on a podcast? Or are you asking the Lord to step in? Is the Lord building your home?**

## Laboring with the Lord

Like changing gears in a car, the shift from trying to build my home in my strength to surrendering things to the Lord is evident. When I attempt things on my own, I feel like the entire weight of my home sits on my shoulders. I don’t have enough time in my day to get everything done. My chores drain my energy, my kids need whatever time I could’ve used for catching up on housework, and routines seem to fly out the window.

But when I stop to pray and ask the Lord to multiply my time and energy? Things get done. Not everything on my to-do list gets completed, because he brings people and situations into my day in unexpected, beautiful ways. But I can see progress in my home and family without so much struggle. My heart is at peace, routines go smoothly, and my focus often shifts from tasks to people. Instead of ending the day feeling overwhelmed and behind, I feel like I actually accomplished something.

The liberating news for you and me is that we don't have to make things happen. We don't have to overwork ourselves and wear ourselves out. Trying to do it all in our own power is empty and useless. Instead, we can work diligently and then rest, noticing what the Lord accomplishes through us and for us. We can slow down and enjoy the basic luxuries of life—like eating and sleeping. After all, they're good gifts from God.

As the Lord builds our homes, the tension from perfection washes away in his perfect peace.

Our willing surrender means we choose to take our burdens and heave them onto Jesus. Just like Psalm 55:22 shares,

Cast your burden on the LORD,  
and he will sustain you;  
he will never permit  
the righteous to be moved.

Jesus himself directs in Matthew 11:28, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (NIV). He gives rest and relief. We simply need to come to him.

If we're being honest, rest and relief aren't always associated with our homes or our hearts, are they? Instead, we think of the things we want or need to do. We concentrate on unfinished to-do lists and the routines we think we need for our particular seasons of life. Then we try to rush and

rearrange, deceived by the fantasy that if we can just figure out a way to balance everything, our homes and lives will look and feel perfect.

This world may dupe us into thinking that finding balance is the key to life. But consider that concept. Balance means we need to evenly distribute the elements in our lives to achieve equilibrium. Any adult woman knows this is virtually impossible in real life! If you consider the demands thrown on you by your family, job, other relationships, and then add your home to the equation, everything falls blatantly off-balance. Any kind of equilibrium feels impossible.

When I think about the responsibilities and tasks required for my job, I'm faced with a seemingly never-ending to-do list. I can work as hard as possible every day, but I'll never get completely caught up. The same goes with my responsibilities and chores at home. Just when I think my house is clean and I'm caught up with laundry and dishes, someone makes a meal or changes their clothing, and my work cycle begins all over again. Adding my husband and children to the picture only drives home the fact that I'm never finished pouring into them and investing in our relationships.

If I focus on these continual demands, pressure begins to build and I start to tense up, feeling the strain of not being able to complete everything. But isn't this self-inflicted stress just a reminder of who I'm trusting in?

When we only consider what *we* can personally do, we focus on ourselves and our strength. We remove God from the equation and zero in on our shortcomings. We don't have enough time or energy or patience or ability to do everything. And what does Psalm 127:1 reveal? "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." All that anxious toil of ours is completely in vain.

Instead of concentrating on what we know we can't do, we need to prayerfully take those feelings to the Lord. God can do what he needs to do. Unless *he* builds our marriages, then our humble, flawed efforts can only go so far. Unless *he* builds our parenting, we will fail. Unless *he's*



the one who builds our careers or ministries, the work we attempt is in vain. And unless *he* builds our homes and multiplies our time, energy, and ideas so we can care for them day by day, we'll drown in overwhelm all the time. It's amazing to experience the freedom that comes from trusting the Lord to build something worthwhile in our homes. We still have work to do, but it's *his* work to do. Instead of considering how to work out *our* solutions, we get to work out *his* solutions and watch how he works everything together.

### Giving God All the Pieces

When my kids were young, my parents treated my family to a week at the beach each summer. And every time, the adults would spend our late nights working on large jigsaw puzzles after the kids were tucked into bed. One year, we started building our puzzle by finding all the corners and edges, but we quickly discovered that our puzzle pieces didn't match the picture on the box.

After the initial anger and frustration wore off—how dare the manufacturer put the wrong pieces in the box!—we kept working on the puzzle. Working only from the colors and shapes was much more difficult than we would've chosen, but by the end of the week we fit the final pieces together and saw our masterpiece.

Our puzzle looked nothing like we initially anticipated, and the process was longer, more draining, and more frustrating than we'd hoped, but the finished product was complete. And that puzzle was beautiful.

In much the same way, what God has in mind for our lives and homes and families may look completely different from anything we imagine. Isaiah 55:8 reminds us, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD." We may feel pressured into thinking the finished product of our lives and homes should turn out one way, but he surprises us with puzzle pieces that are unlike anything we could've asked for or expected.

If we faithfully keep working with what he's given us in our homes, we'll realize that the beauty in his design is more perfect than anything we could have planned on our own. As we remember that his ways are better than ours, we'll begin to break free from the suffocating squeeze of perfection's viselike grip. We'll experience true freedom in our hearts and in our homes as we're liberated from the tension of perfection.