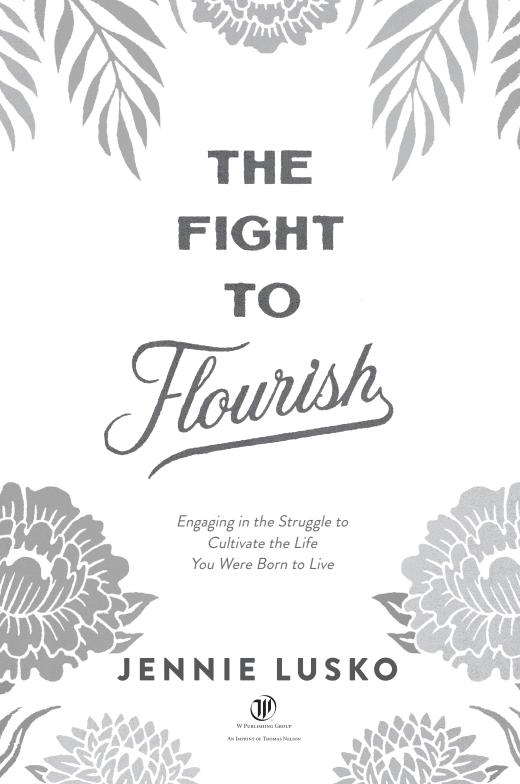


# THE FIGHT TO





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A few days before Christmas we heard the news: Levi and Jennie Lusko had lost their five-year-old daughter.

My husband, Steven, immediately called Levi. Their conversation was short, maybe ten minutes long. He listened to Levi retell what had happened, then he told him we were so sorry and that we were praying.

When he got off the phone, he handed me Jennie's number and said, "I told Levi you would call Jennie."

Panic. Why would he volunteer me for that? I didn't know what to say. I didn't know her that well. We had met only a few times. What do you say to a woman who has lost her child? How will she even go on from here?

So I did what any brave but nonconfrontational person would do: I texted her. I wrote something like this: "Hi, Jennie. This is Holly Furtick. Steven gave me your number. I am so, so sorry to hear about Lenya. Please know that I am praying for you and that I am going to be sending you scriptures here and there. No need to respond. I cannot imagine your pain. We love you guys."

I had no idea that text would be the beginning of a very special friendship. Over the past several years, Jennie has taught me how to fight when you have every excuse to give up. I have watched her fight for her marriage, her children, and herself. She could have turned inward, pushed everyone away, and succumbed to bitterness, and no one would have blamed her. But something in her decided to fight to live—and not just to live but to flourish. Somehow she tapped into an inner strength and continued to fight day after day, and sometimes moment after moment.

Jennie wasn't okay. She was far from okay. She was broken. But she leaned into her pain rather than avoiding it. And she allowed her brokenness to help her experience the presence of God like never before. There is nothing like watching your friend bravely face the darkest season of her life. In a way I've never seen before, Jennie leaned into her pain and then pushed through it.

Many times I've seen grief flood Jennie's eyes mid conversation. I remember one particular time we were in a green room at a church where both of our husbands were ministering. We were chatting and getting to know the people in the room when someone casually asked Jennie how many children she had. It's a common question, but it carries so much pain for her. Graciously, but with tears in her eyes and a smile on her face, Jennie replied, "I have three on earth and one in heaven."

Jennie doesn't avoid places where people might ask difficult questions. She is a woman who understands that, although her life will never be the same, she *can* thrive in this new place.

Pain and suffering are a common denominator in life. No one is exempt. This book is for anyone who is looking for a guide to help them navigate their pain. Jennie has earned the right to speak into your life. She teaches from experience. If she can fight through the most unimaginable pain, so can you. The stories that Jennie recounts in this book are raw and honest, and I'm

confident they will give you the handles you need to face your own situations.

Lenya's life here on earth was tragically cut short, but she lives on through the pages of this book. And I believe she is looking down from heaven proud of her momma who had the courage to fight and the fortitude to write down her story for all of us.

—Holly FurtickElevation Church, Charlotte, NC



It's been six days since our five-year-old daughter, Lenya, died without warning. Six days since I snuggled her close. Six days since I heard the sound of her raspy voice.

The hundred-year-old theater is filled with row after row of people we love, but I don't remember seeing anyone's face. More occupy every inch of standing room. They gather with our family to celebrate the life of our little girl.

As musicians take the stage, the movement and whispers of the crowd dull. Guitars strum melodies honoring the Giver of life as the voices on stage blend with the crowd's, creating a beautiful harmony. I hold my husband's hand. The other I raise in worship, my heart riding the swells of awe and sadness, gratitude and loss.

As the music tapers, the moment comes for my husband, Levi, and I to walk on stage with our seven-year-old daughter. Levi briefly introduces Alivia, who opens her iPad and begins to share about her best friend and sister. Her words (which were well thought out, then written, and then typed) prompt tears.

Then, it's my turn. Heart racing, I try to catch my breath.

Truthfully, I don't want to say anything. I don't even feel like being there, let alone lending my voice to pour out my heart to hundreds of people through a microphone. That's my husband's job. He's the pastor, he's the professional preacher and teacher who speaks every week, not me.

Today I have the privilege of standing on that stage, celebrating the life of Lenya and sharing about my God, whom I don't understand but whom I trust.

Knees buckling, I lift the microphone to my lips. No words come. Instead, tears fall. To try and stop them is pointless.

There's no way I can do this. Who can blame me? Surely no one expects me to say anything anyway.

But there's something in me telling me I can. And I should. And how can I not? Levi whispers into my ear, "The same Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is in you. You can do this."

Fighting back the tears and the instinct to run away, I fill my lungs with oxygen, and as I exhale, my balance steadies. Words begin to flow as I share how I loved being Lenya's mom.

This was one of the first times I remember fighting against my feelings. I didn't want to get on stage and talk that day, but I knew I needed to give my heart a voice. Not just for the people with us but for my sake. I needed to make known my walk in the valley of the shadow of death and declare that God was there—and that He was good. It was in the grief that I learned to fight forward and to fight through. Little did I know that the fight would continue. And little did I know that the fight was what I needed to flourish.

My fight to flourish has stretched beyond the loss of my child.

It has become the everyday struggles for patience, passion, purpose, and peace.

The truth is, I usually feel like I'm failing in some way every day. I see who I want to be: The happy, sweet, sexy, laughing-out-loud kind of wife. The tender, confident, fun, strong mom. The thoughtful, wise, present sister and friend. This is the best version of me, the one who thrives in all she does. She also seems unattainable, out of reach, and it's so discouraging. How can I grow when I don't feel like I'm growing? How can I succeed when I'm facing a struggle of some kind every day, whether I'm late to another appointment or losing my temper with my kids?

I used to think *flourish* was a word that would never describe me—not until heaven anyway. And then I learned something that totally shifted my perspective. The word *flourish* in Hebrew is *parach*, which means "to revive, blossom; to sprout, shoot; become apparent, break out." The Greek version of this word, *anathallo*, is used only one time in the New Testament, when Paul said, "I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity" (Philippians 4:10). You may have known that verse to say "revived" instead of "flourished" if you've read it in a different translation. This is the essence of the same word in Hebrew, to return to a former state of being.

And here is where we learn that the word *flourish* is pretty spectacular. When God calls us to flourish, it doesn't mean to become something brand new. It means to revive, to bring back to life what and who we were meant to be. We weren't created to become something totally different but to become what we were originally designed for.

I love how most grocery stores sell plants and flowers. Makes it easy to pick up butter, broccoli, Taco Tuesday ingredients, and a happy house plant all in one trip. If you walk into a home improvement store, you won't find guacamole, but you'll find a huge department that exists to provide everything you could possibly need to start your own garden: gnome statues, wind chimes, watering cans, potted plants, flowers, and packets with seeds so you can grow your own plants, trees, flowers, herbs, fruits, and vegetables. How do you know what kind of seed is in each packet? Easy—there's a picture on it.

You gently open the packet, careful not to lose any seeds, and look at these tiny, generally not pretty, seemingly insignificant specks. It doesn't seem possible that these puny seeds will grow into the beautiful picture of the sunflower or the zinnia portrayed on the outside. No way. Can't happen. Yet somehow, it does.

The picture of the fully grown, lush specimen of botany is what you are meant to become. It's you. But you're also the seed. It's you too.

God sees you as that picture. You're not quite there, yet you are already there. Confusing? I know. It's a spiritual paradox. But wait—there's more.

The picture on your packet is the true version of you. And the only way to become the version of you that you were born to be is to be found in Jesus Christ. The picture is actually of Jesus.

Romans 8:29 says, "For he knew all about us before we were born and he destined us from the beginning to share the likeness of his Son. This means the Son is the oldest among a vast family of brothers and sisters who will become just like him" (TPT).

You are made in the image of God, in the image of His Son. Do you know that in Christ you are perfect? When God looks at you, He sees Jesus—and Jesus is the picture of what it means to flourish.

The Bible teaches us that when we surrender to Jesus, we are, in a moment, made righteous. We don't earn salvation; we believe and receive freely. We don't pay for it—not with money, not with the good things we do. It's purely a gift from the God who loves us. We're covered by the grace found only in Jesus through His death and resurrection. And in that moment of salvation, we're made like Christ. So when God looks at us, He sees Jesus. That doesn't seem possible to me, but it's the way God does it, and it's beautiful.

But until we get to heaven, where we will truly be perfect like Jesus, we're still here, in these imperfect bodies and minds. We're in a period of sanctification. That's a fancy way of saying that, yes, we're already in Christ, and yes, we're also still in the process of becoming more like him—right now. We're living in the dash between the date of our birth and the date of our last breath on earth. That last breath will lead us to our first breath in heaven with Jesus. But we're not there yet.

Does flourishing in this life seem out of reach? It often feels like that to me. I often feel an underlying sense of guilt because I'm not measuring up and I'm not where I thought I would be. If only there wasn't such a struggle in my soul. The great news, though, is that we are actually in the process of flourishing right now, whether we feel it or not.

A seed is destined to become a mature plant, but it requires the right soil, water, air, light, and temperature. In this book I want to help you understand that a fight "breaks out" (*parach*) when the seed hits the soil. It's not just go time; it's grow time. And that means it's time to fight.

I suspect that you can understand the reality of the fight through the filter of your own story. I love what 1 Timothy 6:12 tells us: "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to

which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (NIV). This word *fight* in the Greek language (in which the New Testament was written) is *agonizomai*, and it means "to fight, to contend, to strive as in a contest for a prize." We see a tension here between faith, receiving the gift of salvation given by God, and the action of fighting and taking hold of the life we were born to live. We receive freely, and we also act vigorously.

The author gives us a real-life picture of fighting the good fight of faith with everything we've got, to strain to obtain the prize. This resonates in my heart because two of my favorite things are boxing and spin class. Do I love punishment? No, but if I need to stay healthy by exercising, then I want to at least have some fun while doing it.

These workouts show me what I have in me. I can do more than I think I can. I can push myself a little more than it may seem. I can work really hard, and then see the results—getting stronger and gaining endurance. I realize not everyone loves to exercise, but if you stick with me, I want to show you some of the truths I've extracted from pushing myself physically. I hope to help you see that you indeed have grit. And that you can grow it. You also have the stamina and endurance to grow stronger in whatever you are facing right now, good or bad. I want you to see that you can fight, that you can grow, that you can be fruitful, and that you can flourish.

You may feel as though you're not flourishing *because* of the fight, *because* of the struggle. But it's the embracing of the fight that will create the space to flourish. A fight for honor. A fight for a sweet spirit. A fight to choose to get uncomfortable. A fight to keep fighting. Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Jesus doesn't mention overcoming the trouble; He tells us He has overcome the

world. We want Him to take away the trial, but He's taking care of the even bigger picture: the world our trouble is in.

I once went out on a limb and started a garden. Keep in mind, it was a tiny one, about two feet by four feet. I envisioned the kids picking strawberries for their yogurt and granola every morning, and me collecting tiny leaves of parsley and mint to flavor sauce and salads. From my backyard to my table—that was my dream.

It was a good little garden, for a brief moment. Things grew—and then they didn't. Or they died before they could thrive. Bless the little garden's heart; it barely provided the things I wanted most. The strawberries were tiny and the herbs were few. It had grown, but it had not flourished.

God doesn't want us to barely peek through the hard soil of life like a tiny weed or a puny bunch of strawberries. He wants us to shoot through the dirt and grow into a tree with deep roots, a thick trunk, strong branches, and most of all, fruit. He wants us to grow luxuriantly. How do I know this? He told us clearly in Psalm 92:

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar in Lebanon; planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, "The LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him." (vv. 12–15 NIV)

The progression of action in this psalm could be wrapped up like this: God plants, God waters, we receive, and we flourish. Palm trees know how to stand their ground. They can grow as tall as two hundred feet and can endure tropical storms. Palm trees may bend, but they will not break. Their roots grow even deeper over time. They may take years to grow, but they last for centuries. They produce sweet fruit like acai, coconuts, and dates.

Cedars can grow to be 130 feet tall with a trunk diameter of over 8 feet. The ancient cedars of Lebanon have existed for thousands of years, surviving wars and storms, even outlasting empires. Because of their high-quality, incorruptible timber, these trees were the first-choice material used to build temples and palaces.

Cedars flourish in cold mountain climates, the kind that my family and I live in now in northwest Montana. I am always amazed how the trees—especially the deciduous ones, the ones that lose their leaves—stay alive in the winter. When autumn sighs to a close and the trees are done showing off their most beautiful and brightest colors, it looks like they die. There's no life left in their empty branches—or so it seems. But what's really happening is dormancy. The trees are in a period of rest. The life source within them focuses its energy on keeping the trees alive during the brutal winter months.

Much like the growth of these legendary trees, we, too, are meant to fight to grow and to bloom. To push through our small and seemingly insignificant seedlike stages. To persevere through the dirt and mess, through the growth and beauty. To experience the strength to live the life that God has designed for us, that He can see even if we can't.

Someone recently asked me if I'm a green thumb, and I replied that I'm more of a green eye. I don't grow things very successfully, but I know a happy house plant when I see one. I just love greenery and plants and trees, and I'm a botanist at heart. I don't know everything about botany, but I do know that seeds don't all grow and

bloom at the same rate and at the same time. A palm tree takes four to six years to fully mature, but a cedar can take multiple decades. The queen of the Andes, a rare forty-foot plant that thrives in harsh climates, flowers just once and only for a few weeks in its eighty-to one-hundred-year lifetime. There are seeds that even need strange elements to germinate, like some Australian plants that require the heat of fire.

And just like seeds germinate and mature at different rates, we each flourish in our own way and in our own time. There's no room for comparison. We are each running or walking or even speed walking in our own soil, at our own pace, in our own seasons, with our own unique DNA. I don't have to have the same stride as you. You have a different stride from me. And that's okay.

I recently hiked a mountain with my friends. At the start of the hike, there were two trails to choose from. One was lush and green and dotted with flowers. Birds sang in the trees lining the trail, inviting me forward. I was about to happily turn that way and enjoy a picturesque hike with my friends, but they said, "Oh Jennie, we're actually going *this* way!"

I turned toward the trail they pointed to. Horror met my eyes in the form of the steepest incline I'd ever seen. I couldn't see the top, just up. And then *more* up. There were no trees. Nothing lush. Barely any flowers. I couldn't hear any birds—or anything else, except possibly the soundtrack to the scariest movie you've ever seen playing faintly in the background.

It was the hardest hike of my life (although it wasn't the hardest of the hikes on this mountain by a long shot). As I climbed, I felt as if I was barely making any forward progress. I may have been slower than my friends, but I made it (with the help and encouragement of one of my friends taking it slow with me). I may have had to take

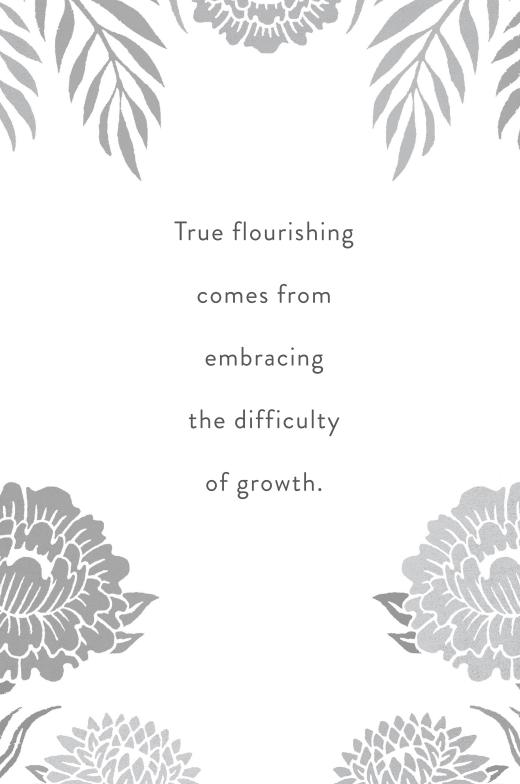
more breaks than them, but I made it. I may have slipped back a few times, but I made it.

True flourishing comes from embracing the difficulty of growth. And we can't do that in our own strength. God doesn't call us to flourish, then pat us on the back and ditch us. He doesn't say, "Okay, Jennie, good luck, have fun! Don't wither and die out there!" God calls us and then equips us. He empowers us. He strengthens us for battle. And He is with us the whole way.

We just sent off our oldest daughter to public middle school after being homeschooled her whole life. While it was so hard to let her go, to drop her off at school that first day and watch her walk into the unknown, it was comforting to know we would pick her up at the end of the day and talk about how it went. We'd continue the conversation over dinner and later in the hot tub. We aren't sending Alivia off with "Good luck! Don't make bad choices. See you next year when you go to high school!" and neglecting to equip her. We are walking with her, training her, and teaching her the very best we can.

As you fight to flourish, my hope is that my words on the following pages will remind you that God is with you, teaching, training, and empowering you. The fighting you do now will lead you to the flourishing version of you God created you to be.

As I look back, I see how God was preparing my heart for the worst experience of my life. A few months before Lenya went to heaven, I was reading the book *In Search of Balance* by Richard Swenson. This line struck me: "We had better love with abandon, for what's around the corner is not ours to know."



I'm so grateful that God, who is so good and loves me so much, would ready my heart for what was around the corner. He knew that 2012 would begin with celebrating the birth of our fourth child, Clover Dawn Lusko—and He knew it would end with mourning the death of our second-born daughter, Lenya Avery Lusko. God wasn't surprised by this. And He was in control all along.

I don't know what this year will bring you or what last year or the one before that did. I do know that God loves you, and that you can trust Him. Whatever fight you might be in today, know that you have the word *flourish* written all over you and your future.

I'm so grateful you have decided to join me in this journey. As we walk together, I want you to see how special you are and that where you are in life right now is special. I want you to know that it's not only possible for you to flourish in the middle of this fight but that it's necessary to have this fight in order to flourish. I'm in this with you, and I hope in sharing some of my struggles, you can see how you can keep growing.

If you find yourself asking the question "How can I flourish in this season?" I want to help you see that it's not just dirt you're planted in; it's soil with the right nutrients. It's not just crap you feel stuck in; it's the fertilizer you need. You're not buried with no way out; you're planted. You're not taking a lifetime to bloom on the outside; you're growing a strong and deep root system under the surface. You're not forgotten; you've been sown by a Gardener who fights for you.

Let's grow, girl.



The Best, the Worst, and the In Between

Fighting forward often doesn't feel like it—forward, that is. It feels more like survival. Barely getting by. Dripping in sweat, muscles aching, legs failing, but still standing, at least long enough so that your opponent doesn't take you down with a one-two punch before the bell rings.

Doesn't sound much like flourishing.

Hard times have a way of knocking us off our feet, but they also have a way of reminding us of what is most important. Before the worst day of my life, I loved God and I trusted Him. I knew that heaven was real and near, and I knew God had a purpose for me. But in the year Lenya died, God had been teaching me so much, not only about Him but about myself. In fact, I remember so clearly feeling like I was learning more in that year than I had in my whole life. It was a season of growth. I had four daughters, six years old and under. I was being stretched and strengthened in my heart, in my family, in our church. I had no idea that God had even more for me as 2012 drew to a close, no idea that I would feel His presence more than ever, even in darkness.

1

Reliving Lenya's life and last days on earth in order to share this story with you has been one of the hardest things I have ever done. Flipping through journal entries splashed with tears; replaying scenes of our daughter dancing, reciting Bible verses, and playing with her sisters; remembering what she looked like when her body had surrendered its last breath—these things gutted me. But they also gave me the chance to connect some dots. Some of the most random moments in this story have been the most important. They're reminders that God is in control behind the scenes, reminders that He was, is, and will always be with me.

### Words of Life

It was Thursday morning, six days before Christmas 2012. Fresh coffee brewed as eggs sizzled in the frying pan. Daisy looked at a book as if she were reading, although she was only two and she couldn't read (or could she?). Clover giggled in her high chair, observing everything like a tiny queen on her throne. As Alivia dressed for the day, I heard a cadence of footsteps coming down the stairs that could only be Lenya's. Her feet landed a bit harder and louder than the others. It was morning as usual in the Lusko household.

I scrambled eggs as Lenya settled at the table, her thick, messy hair tumbling over her head as she scribbled a birthday note for a friend's party in a few hours. I looked at her outfit and smiled. She wore one of Alivia's sparkly shirts paired with denim bell-bottoms a size too big for her with her favorite skirt over them, and hand-me-down boots from a friend. Around her neck hung one of my necklaces adorned with plastic beads in the shape of birds. It was a wild outfit—Lenya style to the max.

The week was full of dinners, meetings, staff events, and birthday parties. I was exhausted, and I reminded myself that although things might be crazy now, Friday Family Day was coming. And it was going to be the best.

Friday is Levi's and my day off. We unplug from everything to spend time as a family with as few distractions as possible. We had plans to swish and stumble our way around a rink with ice skates strapped to our feet. Levi would take Lenya to shop for presents for her sisters, and afterward we would all dress up and enjoy a fancy dinner out.

But first we had to make it through Thursday. After the kids finished their eggs and oatmeal and I plucked an unknown object off Clover's face and wiped up a sticky substance on the counter, we scrambled out the door to the eventful day ahead.

"Wait!" Lenya shouted, almost falling forward as she stopped in the doorway. "I have to write a Christmas card to Aunt Aimee!" Another delay, but I knew how important this was for her. I gave her the time to write the note, and we left it on the table to mail later. Lenya was thoughtful like that. In her five-year-old mind and tender heart, she knew the power of words, that they could bring a smile to someone's face, brighten a dull mood, or turn tears into laughter.

I love words. I don't have a widely extensive vocabulary myself, and I usually stumble to find the words I'm looking for in conversation, but I am fascinated by them, what they mean, and where they originate from. God loves words so much that He filled a book with them. Not only that, but He gave us the Word of all words, as it says in John 1:1–5:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All

things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

Jesus is the Word, and He changes everything. God's words in the Bible can transform our hearts and our lives. In the same way, the words people speak over us can give us the strength we need in the fight.

A little over a week earlier, Levi and I had strolled through the congested sidewalks of New York City. With my arm linked through his, we drank in the holiday window displays on Fifth Avenue and shopped for a few extra Christmas gifts for the girls. I even bought a pair of dusty-rose corduroys for myself. They weren't something I would normally wear, but I tend to shop impulsively like that.

We had talked about seeing a Broadway play that night, but instead we found ourselves at a midweek worship gathering hosted by our friends. The church met in an old theater with a large stage and ornate ceiling and walls. It was dark, yet inviting. I felt the beat and the bass in the music deep in my chest.

The room filled with expectation and anticipation as a pastor I didn't know started encouraging specific people in the room. I don't know about you, but I had never experienced anything like this growing up. I had heard of churches where the pastor takes a moment to listen to what God might be speaking to specific people in a packed room. I imagined it could get a little awkward; people are sitting there, not knowing if they should stick around or use a restroom break as an excuse to run away. But there was nothing awkward about what happened to me.

As the pastor spoke inspiring and challenging words to different

people in the room, I rummaged around my giant mom bag. My fingers frantically pushed aside my hand sanitizer, allergy medicine, a diaper, in search of tissues for the woman next to me, who was moved to tears. Why on earth did I bring this thing with me when my kids aren't even here?

As I placed my purse back on the floor underneath my seat, I heard the pastor call my name.

I froze. Wait. Did he just say my name? He must certainly mean Levi, not me. Or maybe he means another, more significant Jennie. Probably a Jennie who spells her name with a y at the end. My heart began to beat wildly. What is he going to tell me? Is he going to call me out on something in front of everyone?

"Jen—Jennie," he began, his voice powerful and comforting at the same time.

"It is not an accident you are here, Jennie . . . You didn't know you were going to be here. I don't think that was the big plan. I don't know; maybe it was. Jennie, you are going to walk away with a new impartation tonight. God has placed something into your heart. I don't know you from a bar of soap, but you have a new authority about you . . . God is going to challenge you to take a risk in Him, to trust Him, to believe that He is with you. He's going to back you, Jennie. His heart is toward you. His face is toward you. His hand is toward you. You mustn't ever forget that. You are blessed, Jennie, not cursed. God's hand is on you. You are here in the purpose and plan of God."

This was so out of the ordinary. I didn't really know what to do with his message. Tears filled my eyes and fell freely down my face.

What happened in that theater that evening was a holy moment. I may have not understood it fully, but something beautiful unfolded when that man's words hit my heart. It's always amazing to be

reminded that we are not alone, that God is with us, and that He loves us. I thought about these things as we made our way back home the next day.

The following week, thrust into the chaos of preparing for Christmas and scuttling through a calendar full to the brim with nonstop events and growing lists, I wrote about my experience in my journal:

This has been such a busy season. Nonstop. Like literally. But I'm not freaking out and it's only by God's grace. I've had to speak in front of people three times in three days, and tonight Levi and I are doing a capture together for the recap of what we learned this year. And it's really not easy for me—I get so nervous, but I've been really taking God at His word when He told me to be bold and to speak confidently because God is my backing. He only is my strength. And I've been experiencing this. It's been a week today since Pastor Robert spoke that over me, and I've had more opportunities in these last four days than in a long time. . . . I truly believe that this year has been a huge year for me. I fully believe that I have grown more in 2012 than in my whole life combined!

## When the Best Turns into the Worst

On Thursday afternoon, I dropped the kids off at my mom's for the evening so Levi and I could have an at-home date night (a practice I highly recommend). I could wrap the kids' presents without them peeking or grabbing my scissors or chewing on the gift tags,

Life is good!

and my mom would get to spend time with her grandkids. Winwin. After enjoying my specialty—spaghetti with meat sauce—and quality make-out time with my husband, I buried myself in gifts and tape and ribbons and paper, while Levi watched *Home Alone*. As I finished putting the creative touch on the last gift, I remember soaking in the moment, grateful for time spent together before the start of our wildly wonderful Family Day.

On the drive to my mom's to pick up the kids, Levi sighed loudly, exhaling away the past few days. "I just feel so relaxed."

I nodded, rubbing his forearm draped over my thigh. I felt the same. Friday was here—well, almost, but basically here. Heat blasted from the vents. Outside, stars sprinkled the midnight Montana sky over a landscape of glistening snow. White. Pure. Bright. Light in the darkness.

And then, though we'd barely pulled into my mom's driveway, silence traded spaces with panic. My younger brother, David, ran out the front door, and as I met him at the edge of the walkway, he blurted, "Jennie, Lenya really wants you!" His breath was ragged. "She's not taking her asthma treatment!"

My heart plunged to the pit of my stomach. Sprinting into the kitchen, I found Lenya sitting on the table. My mom was holding her. Lenya looked at me, her face blank and drained of color.

I grabbed the nebulizer from my mom, held Lenya with one arm, and tried to get her to take her treatment. Instead, she passed out. Even today, the image of her lying limp on the kitchen counter tears me apart.

At that moment, Levi came in the house and immediately jumped into action. His hands clamped down rhythmically on Lenya's tiny chest, but there was no response. Time began to churn in slow motion, but in a blur. I remember crying desperate prayers toward heaven and telling Lenya that I loved her and that it was going to be okay. Because it was, right?

Lights and sirens filled the driveway as paramedics rushed in and rushed our little girl back out on a stretcher. Levi rode with her. My brother drove me in my car on the icy road a few minutes behind the ambulance.

As Levi and I waited in a small room at the hospital, crying and praying, a doctor appeared.

I wanted to believe the best, I wanted to hope for the miracle, but in my gut, I knew Lenya was gone. She had stopped breathing so long ago.

"I am so sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Lusko. Lenya is nonresponsive. There is nothing more we can do."

It was as if I couldn't really hear the words coming from his mouth. I knew what he was saying, but I can only remember things happening in slow motion as he began to speak. His words, slowly connecting to my mind, were words of death. It was actually true: our five-year-old was gone.

We followed him to a room where Lenya lay. And here is where heaven truly met earth, where the tension between light and darkness collided in a way I had never before experienced. It felt as though someone had come up behind us and pushed us into a pit with only one way in and no way out. And at the same time, as I stepped toward our daughter's body, I couldn't help but feel that even in my darkest night I was overwhelmed by the love of the Light of the world.

It is unnatural to look at your child when her soul has left this earth. That second, my heart began a slow and steady break that would, over time, morph into a permanent dull ache. Lenya's eyes were open. Her face was cool to my touch, her features beautiful

and delicate. Levi took one of her hands, and I held the other on the opposite side of the stretcher.

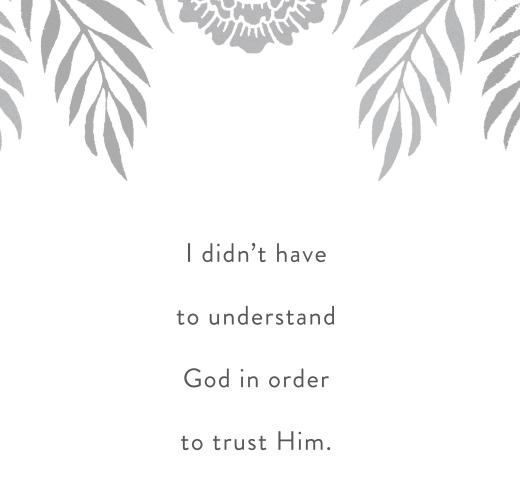
"God, You give and take away. Blessed be Your name. You gave us Lenya. We don't understand, but we give her back to You." Levi's words were words of surrender and praise spoken with our daughter lying lifeless before us. Words wrapped in a peace beyond what the human mind can comprehend. We felt God with us as tears streamed from our eyes and Levi reached down to close hers.

While my worst day was unfolding one terrible scene at a time, I realized an awful yet beautiful tension. Our worst day was actually Lenya's best day. Her death, while horrible to us, led her straight to her Savior. The Bible says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). She wasn't with us, but she was with Jesus. Lenya was in heaven, more alive now than she had ever been.

# How Am I Supposed to Leave the Hospital?

In that room, my protective mama heart swarmed with questions. We had worked so hard to take care of Lenya, to make sure she was healthy and loved. Suddenly she had been snatched away from us into heaven, a place that seems so big, crowded, and overwhelming—a place so far away from our arms. I wondered who was taking care of her. Was she wandering around all by herself? Was anyone assigned to watch her? Was she lost?

My mind spun in every direction. I'll never forget looking down and noticing my pants, the pink corduroy ones I bought in New York City. As my gaze rested on the stunning face of our daughter, the words spoken to me eight days earlier echoed softly: *You are* 





blessed, not cursed. You are in the plan and purpose of God. His hand is on you. His face is toward you. God has your back.

I knew these were scriptural truths. But I also knew that Lenya was dead and wouldn't be coming back. It's hard to reconcile the two, but deep down in my heart, I knew I didn't have to understand God in order to trust Him.

Trusting God came instinctively in that moment, but there were other fights I would still have to show up for—the first one being, how was I supposed to leave the hospital?

I honestly don't know how long we were there. I know Alivia came in at one point bringing Lenya's purse with her, and we had to tell her that her sister was in heaven. But eventually, I found myself in the front seat of our car. I don't remember how I got there, though I do remember suggesting to Levi that we invite everyone at the ER that night to church.

How did I move forward? Step by dreaded step, walking toward a new reality that I despised. Weeping. Reminding myself that the body of my daughter I left in that unnaturally bright and cold hospital room wasn't all she was. Yes, her body was there, but her soul—who she really was—was with her Savior in heaven. She was perfectly pure in His presence.

I had to make the intentional decision to walk out the front door. And I had to choose to trust God in the middle of the pain. I knew I couldn't face a single thing without Him as my guide, as my lamp lighting the road before me. I couldn't do anything in my own strength.

I wish I could tell you I've arrived and that I have a five-step program for how to leave the hospital, so to speak. I haven't, and I don't. I fight every day. It's a fight to love. A fight to grow. But I want to fight to flourish. Like the seed surrounded by darkness and dirt,

we need these very elements to grow. It's what we need to become stronger.

In January 2013, sixteen days after Lenya went to heaven, I bought a new journal, an extra-large, plain black notebook. Unmarked, unlined pages begged to absorb new thoughts, new memories, new insight. I titled it *A New Chapter. A Terrible One. A Beautiful One.* 

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16–18)

As I look ahead to this year, I have so many emotions/ thoughts/feelings/fears. I hate the thought of approaching this year without Lenya. I love the thought that she is in His presence in fullness of joy. I hate the thought of the possibility of forgetting memories with her / of her. I love that I got five wonderful years with her. I hate those demonic thoughts of regret and how I should've been a better mommy to her. I love that talk of heaven was always on our lips—that we talked about Jesus + His Word + prayed always. I love that we had a full five years with her. I hate that she's not here anymore. I love Lenya. I hate that our lives are forever changed. I love that we have three beautiful daughters to teach and to train and to love. I hate this aching in my soul. At the same time, I love it because I've never experienced God like this before  $\rightarrow$  His grace  $\rightarrow$  His love  $\rightarrow$  His peace. I'm floored. This light affliction is for

a moment. This year I cling to Jesus. I cling to His word. I stand on His promises. I choose to do right. I choose to worship and obey.

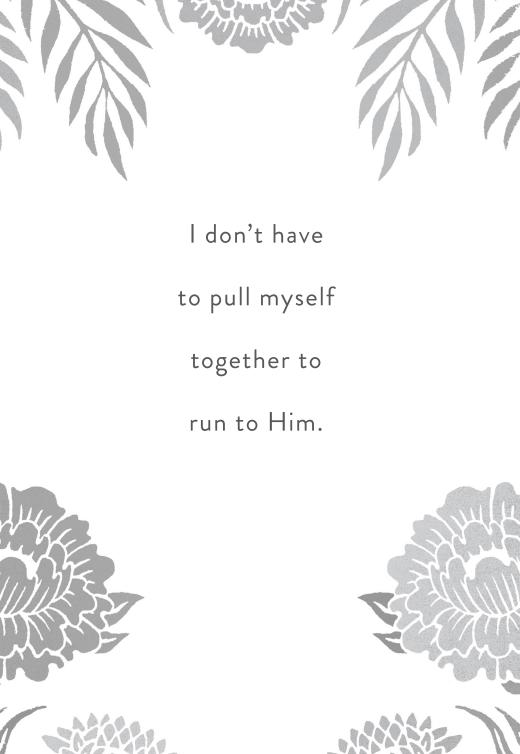
When we're shoved into a storm, it can be easy to flounder. What growth is even possible when we're doing everything we can just to keep our heads above water? But it is possible to see God's goodness in the struggle, His love over the valley of death, His grace through the pain. I hold tight to the hope of heaven, yet I also grieve. I hurt. I love. I cry. I remember. I feel stuck. I move forward. It's in this tension that we can grow, if we keep trusting God and believing He is with us and has more for us.

### Sunshine at the Grave

Years later, I stand in a cemetery on a cloudy day. Headstones stretch as far as the eye can see. I don't come here very often; I know Lenya's not here. But when I do stand at her grave, I am reminded of eternity. On her headstone, we chose to write 2 Timothy 1:10: "Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (NIV).

The air freezes my face. I can barely feel the falling tears. I'm reminded that the body of the little girl I carried in my womb, birthed in a room with a view of Glacier National Park, nurtured through medical struggles, and snuggled tight, lies underneath the cold ground. My heart aches in the deepest parts, a pain too great to carry.

I have to remind myself I'm not alone. I don't have to carry this heavy weight by myself. I wasn't meant to. Psalm 68:19 says, "Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens"



(NIV). God is with me. And He doesn't only carry the things that weigh me down; He also carries me.

I worship as I weep. The cloudy day depicts the state of my heart: gray. I'm so thankful I don't need sunshine in my heart in order to worship Jesus. I don't have to pull myself together to run to Him. I can be who I am, right where I am, with Him.

As I ache and long for heaven, the clouds part, inviting in a ray of sunlight that seems meant just for me: a picture of God reminding me of His presence in an overcast moment.

As pastor Robert Ferguson told me that night in New York City, maybe you didn't plan to be here in this place, in this pain, in this predicament, or even on this platform, but it's not an accident. God has called you uniquely for this situation, right here, right now. Whatever you are facing as you read these words, my hope is for you to be confident that you were born for this very fight. And you were born to flourish in it.





# THE FIGHT TO Flourish by JENNIE LUSKO

What if your struggles aren't a barrier to thriving but an invitation into your most vibrant days?

Just like some plants need darkness to grow, many of us grow stronger in our faith in the dark and difficult times. It is in the sacred space of pain and promise that we begin to flourish. In *Fight to Flourish*, Jennie Lusko offers biblical hope in your struggles through personal and vulnerable examples of God not only helping her survive the darkness but thrive in it.

Jennie draws on her experiences after the loss of her five-year-old daughter, Lenya, to show you that the ingredients for a fresh and thriving life are right in front of you.

Fighting and flourishing are meant to blend together. God can help you make the most out of your struggle because a flourishing life in every season is worth fighting for.

