

Good Enough
Mother

God at work in the challenge of parenting

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Foreword

Every now and then, you pick up a book that you find yourself relating to for all kinds of reasons and at all kinds of levels. This is one such book! Admittedly, it's written primarily for mothers, of which I am one, and so it was always going to interest me.

But it does so much more than simply that: through its pages you'll be introduced to some thought-provoking insights about motherhood in general as well as being gently challenged to acknowledge some of the less desirable emotions that motherhood throws up, and you'll receive the courage to see them transformed into something that is godly and brings blessing.

There are humorous anecdotes, references to stories—adults' and children's—that we know and love, and bits from scripture that are poignant and totally life-giving.

Whether you're feeling fairly or barely or simply not at all 'good enough' when you begin to read, I am certain that by the end you will find yourself happy to be the mother God has made you to be, doing the job as only you can and using the unique qualities that only you have. Enjoy!

Lindsay Melliush



Introduction

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

GALATIANS 5:22–23

One of the many prompts to write this book came from times when I have sat in coffee shops near my suburban home and watched the antenatal groups gather to exchange ideas, compare sizes of bump and—above all—stare in awe at those of their number who have finally produced a baby. As the spotlessly clean and shiny buggy/car-seat combo is carefully manoeuvred between the tables, the L-plates are practically visible. The new mother usually looks radiant but also somewhat awestruck, with dark circles under her eyes and an outfit of baggy pregnancy clothes, which are all she has managed to scramble on that morning. She parks, smiles, and then cautiously lifts the rain-cover to reveal a minute, red-faced, bug-eyed scrap of humanity. And everybody exclaims in wonder.

These days, anticipation of motherhood starts way before even conception, with all the nutritional and exercise advice now available. As the foetus grows, we glimpse it on ultrasound scans, passed round as the very first baby pictures—now that improved technology means you can actually see something resembling a baby. (I still remember my disappointment at a scan image of my little brother, in which he resembled little more than an avant-garde painting—‘Moonrise over stormy sea’.)

There is that amazing, unforgettable moment in the room where the birth takes place: suddenly a new person is present, a completely separate individual who was not there in quite the same way just minutes before. This new person is unique, in the truest sense of

that overused word. Their exact genetic combination will not be replicated, no matter how many children we produce. They may look very different from the way we imagined (a good friend once told me that she thought all baby boys looked like little goblins for the first few weeks), they may not be the sex we had hoped for, but they are ours, for better or worse. We have become mothers and, as we smile sweatily for the camera, clutching our bundle of boy or girl, we have in fact embarked on an adventure—or, as some might prefer to say, rollercoaster ride.

For others, embarking on motherhood means the granting of an adoption order. Their child (maybe more than one) is chosen and slowly introduced to its future parents, with a greater role played by experts outside the family. At the end of the whole process, though, there is that same hands-on physical and emotional experience of mothering, and the concomitant issues, questions and challenges, which will be part of the focus of this book.

During the first bewildering stages of caring for children, it is easy to forget (and perhaps this is a good thing) that motherhood is for life, not just for those times when the Baby Gap outfits are on special offer. Once a mother, always a mother. We have joined a historic global club, helping us make connections with other women far removed from us in place and time. As our children grow and reach different milestones, we may find ourselves suddenly noticing as never before the news stories dealing with children of similar ages. The starving baby in Darfur is the same age as our little one, but a fraction of the size... and for the first time we sense something of his mother's agony as we imagine ourselves in her position, unable to do anything except watch him die. When we read news reports of a toddler going missing at a shopping mall, we glance anxiously round at our own three-year-old, who, like most three-year-olds, is prone to wander. Later, we shudder at reports of teenagers feuding with knives and guns. And one Remembrance Sunday, we suddenly realize how many of the dead, especially in the First World War, were barely in their 20s. What would it be like to wave our own sons off to the front line, not knowing if we would ever see them again?

And we probably find ourselves looking with fresh eyes—and a bit more understanding—at our own mothers. So that was how they felt when we threw up on the new sofa, when we shouted, ‘I hate Granny’ at the family Christmas dinner, when we snarled, ‘What do you want now?’ in response to a knock on the bedroom door, when we did not bother phoning home for three weeks.

How we feel about our own competence as mothers is almost certain to be bound up with how we felt we were mothered. We may vow to do better than we were done by—or we may worry whether we will ever manage to give our children the apparently effortless flow of unconditional love and care that enveloped us throughout our own childhood.

Becoming a mother also raises the question of how we pass on our Christian faith. There is the challenge of finding time to nurture our own relationship with God, when a stretch of uninterrupted time for prayer and Bible reading is a distant dream. We also have to start thinking about how we will encourage our children to grow in the faith, in the hope that in the course of time they will choose it for themselves. Not only do we need encouragement to continue growing in faith ourselves, but we now have the task of discipling young ones, a task for which we perhaps feel very ill-equipped. The well-known Galatians ‘fruit of the Spirit’ passage at the start of this introduction, providing the framework for the book as a whole, can end up as no more than a source of discouragement as we realize how far we have to go in providing fertile ground for such fruit to grow, in our own lives and in the lives of our children.

This is not a book about practical parenting skills; I do not claim to be any kind of expert in child rearing and there are many, many books around that offer plenty of advice. Nor do I claim to be an expert theologian or Bible teacher. Again, other books offer in-depth analysis and application of New Testament teaching on the fruit of the Spirit, and others analyse biblical teaching on parenting. I have not written this book purely for mothers with small children or those with teenagers or even ‘empty nesters’, but for all women, of whatever age, who want to spend some time reflecting on having,

or having had, children. Inevitably, a fair bit of what I say is drawn from personal experience (my own and other people's), and you may not find it resonating with your own experiences and opinions. But whatever your situation—single mum multitasking two part-time jobs and three full-time children, or executive wife with globetrotting husband and son and daughter making homes of their own—I hope you will find food for thought here, as well as ideas for discussion if you are using the book with a group.

I should point out, too, that on the whole I have written with mothers in mind rather than parents in general. Of course, fathers are welcome to read this book but, in my experience, there are more mothers than fathers who worry about the whole 'good enough' issue. While UK society has done a lot to promote gender equality, it is still the mothers who not only give birth to the children in the first place but usually end up being responsible for most of the child care. Perhaps there is already a dad writing a similar book for other dads, on coping with the particular pressures and cultural expectations of fatherhood (are they sporty enough, expert at DIY, fun yet authoritative, a reliable breadwinner yet also helpful around the house, and so on). As a mother myself, I want to focus on exploring how women feel about themselves as mothers and also to consider the ways in which God can be at work through, rather than despite, our personal circumstances.

How does this book work? The first chapter sets out what I see as the foundational principle: we love our children and want to be good mothers for them. The next five chapters explore five different issues, some of which may be more relevant to certain phases of mothering than others (tiredness being key in the early stages, for example, while the question of ambition will probably crop up later, unless you are the sort of person who gets competitive about Apgar scores).

What is common to these five issues is that they can all feel like negative states or points for condemnation, making us assume we are 'not good enough' in our mothering. With a shift in perspective, though, we can identify them as opportunities for learning and growth. It is in the very places where we struggle most that we can

find the fruit of the Spirit emerging. To use a gardening analogy, the development of the best fruit is often linked to some kind of stress for the plant. Tomatoes actually taste better when they have been given too little, rather than too much, water. Perhaps the experience of pacing the living room floor, with yet another evening dominated by a colicky baby, will lead to our hearts brimming with a harvest of delicious produce...

Each chapter of this book takes a negative issue, explores how we can go about discovering something positive in it, and then makes a link to a relevant aspect of the fruit of the Spirit. As already mentioned, we often assume that our spiritual development has to be put on hold, especially in the intense early years of mothering, but if we make a conscious effort to remain rooted in God's love, allowing him to nourish our hearts, he will be at work to ensure that our lives bear his fruit. We may feel that we can produce nothing but weeds or, at best, a few short-lived flowers, but we can hold on to the promise of Jesus made to his disciples shortly before his death and resurrection: 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit' along with the warning, 'apart from me you can do nothing' (John 15:5).

The final chapter concludes with reflections on the peace and joy that many often feel they lack as mothers, especially on rainy winter mornings when they are late on the school run. These terms are closely linked to the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, the wonderful state of well-being and blessedness that is God's wish for all his children. As the years pass and our children grow, we can find it easier to reflect on and learn from our experiences, even if there are some things that we still find hard to accept or understand—and it can become easier to see our heavenly Father's hand upon us and our families.

At the end of the book, there is a section explaining how to use it with groups (including those bringing together Christians and 'seekers', those consisting of regular church members and those set up to draw in people on the fringes of the church), and some material to help you do just that. Each chapter, meanwhile, concludes with a point for reflection and prayer.

I would like to conclude this introduction by dedicating the book to my own mother, Anne, now a resourceful matriarch with eleven grandchildren at the time of writing, who deserves a mothering medal for (among other things) camping rough in Scotland with four young children, drying the hand-rinsed terry nappies over a campfire. And special thanks and love to my own three children for teaching me so much, over nearly two decades of mothering.

— Chapter One —

Brimming with love but longing for goodness

The fruit of the Spirit is love... goodness.

We begin with our foundational principle, already spelled out in the Introduction: we love our children and want to be good mothers for them. For many of us, though, the idea of ‘good’ is actually subsumed in ‘perfect’. We want nothing less than the very best for *our* child! The whole notion of ‘good enough’ can so easily be heard not as ‘just fine as it is—quite acceptable’ but as ‘struggling to reach the pass mark—almost certain to fail’. We know that we want our mothering to be characterized by goodness, yet we fear that precisely the opposite will be the case.

Where do they come from, these doubts and fears as to whether we will even manage to do OK, let alone well? Surely, we can simply trust our instincts, which will kick in as soon as the first baby arrives? After all, parenting is only natural, a matter of common sense, isn’t it? Maybe the problem is that these days we know too much. There are so many experts telling us what we can do to ensure we are good mothers and be the best for our children from long before birth. Of course, the advice is intended to be helpful and may be based on extensive clinical research, but there is just so much of it and it seems to change so often.

There is advice on when and how to conceive, what to eat, drink and do in pregnancy—and what is forbidden. There is advice on birthing procedures and positions, huge amounts of advice on the care of newborn babies (especially sleeping arrangements—I was

given different and conflicting guidelines for each of my three babies, born in 1989, 1991 and 2002) and developmental milestones to worry about. That is before we face decisions about potty training, discipline, TV, day care, primary school, clubs and activities, SATS—and did I mention mobile phones, secondary schools, alcohol use, staying out late, parties, choices for GCSEs, AS levels, A2s...

Even when we have made up our minds about something, we sense the nagging whisper within, asking whether we have made the right decision. We may be tempted to peek sideways at the children of our wider family and friends and wonder how they are so clean/articulate/healthy/musical/sporty (delete according to pet anxiety).

It's enough to make us long for the long-ago era of a certain kind of BBC costume drama, when the skies were unpolluted, the lifestyle relatively sustainable and mothering conducted according to a tried-and-tested set of rules, handed down to each new generation of daughters. Or we might dream of packing up the family and escaping the rat-race by joining an Amazonian tribe, living as they have always lived in the rainforest, close to nature and with so little in the way of wardrobe decisions. Or maybe that's just me.

The ideal mother—or not

If we do have a sense of inadequacy, it may come from our own preconceptions about what motherhood should consist of, what it should look like and sound like. Instinctively, we will formulate these ideas from our own experiences of being mothered, but beyond that we are likely to make assumptions based on what we see and hear as we grow towards adulthood—the books we read, the TV and films we watch, and of course the other real-life families that we know.

The classic storybook 'good mother' tended to have more, rather than fewer, children. She was firm but fair, wise and thoughtful, warm and unruffled by her chaotic yet lively household. Here are just a few memorable fictional examples: Mother in *The Railway Children* (E. Nesbit, 1906), who manages to homeschool her children, write

magazine fiction and keep up appearances so bravely that most of the family never guess that their father is in prison, victim of a miscarriage of justice. There is Mrs Walker in *Swallows and Amazons* (Arthur Ransome, 1930), who lets her sons and daughters sail off and camp on an island by themselves (just the first of the many adventures that she facilitates).

Then there is Ma from the *Little House* stories (Laura Ingalls Wilder, 1932–43, not forgetting the later TV series), who bravely embarks on a rugged pioneering life with her husband and young girls, and manages to make even a riverside dugout into a welcoming home. Less well known but equally influential to my 10-year-old imagination were the two contrasting mothers in Patricia St John's book *Rainbow Garden* (1960): the flighty and glamorous secretary, described as a 'butterfly', and the kindly mother-of-six-and-vicar's-wife, who provides a welcoming temporary home for the butterfly's sulky daughter, Elaine.

More recently, the solid virtues of the 'good mother' have been personified in the real-life form of the Earth Mother, perhaps the dominant mothering stereotype before the rise of today's 'yummy mummy' and her backslidden sister, the 'slummy mummy'. I remember coming across a fair number of Earth Mothers while growing up in the 1970s. She tended to dress in sensible, clumpy shoes, Clothkits skirts and hand-knitted stripy jumpers. Her home was cosy and untidy, and (since I grew up in Cambridge) she may well have been writing her doctoral thesis in the spare bedroom in between making vegetable curry and patchwork quilts, but she gave a strong impression of being contentedly immersed in the lives of her children.

Today, it is interesting to see the rise of 'mummy lit' in the wake of 'chick lit'—and much of it is self-deprecating, not to say provocative, with titles such as *Confessions of a Bad Mother*, *The Bad Mother's Handbook*, *The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy*, *The Secret Life of a Slummy Mummy*, *Secret Diary of a Demented Housewife* and *The Shopaholic and Baby*. While the general tone is humorous, the subtext can actually be a helpful corrective to our society's collective paranoia

about ‘doing’ motherhood correctly. What these books imply is that it’s all right to muddle through, to be seen to struggle, to find the whole parenting business less of a picnic in the park and more of an army assault course—fun but strenuous.

There have also been a number of Christian books over recent decades, which have taken a not dissimilar warts-and-all approach, tackling the mistaken assumption that Christian families should be flawless models of functional community living, a little corner of heaven. Off the top of my head, I can think of *Families without Pretending*, *The Art of Imperfect Parenting*, *Child Rearing for Fun* (subtitled ‘Trust your instincts and enjoy your children’), and Alie Stibbe’s *Barefoot in the Kitchen*. This last book I know particularly well, having edited it, and it is notable for the author’s willingness to be vulnerable and share honestly her struggles as a young mother, when life sometimes felt like an unrelieved spiritual wilderness.

While the whole ‘slummy mummy’ agenda can provide a bit of relief, let’s return to the question at the start of this chapter: why are so many of us prone to seeing ourselves as just as likely to do it all wrong as manage to raise happy, healthy children? Is it the fault of hearing too much from ‘experts’ of whatever shade? Is it another sign that we live in an unravelling culture, with toxic values, dominated by monolithic market forces? Would we feel the same anxieties if we were living in a blissful rainforest retreat or in a log cabin in the other-end-of-nowhere? And does being a Christian help, or make it all worse, if our faith brings with it another unrealistic stereotype of perfect motherhood to which we feel we should aspire?

Falling in love and growing into love

Our foundational principle is that we love our children and, because we love them, we want to be good enough for them. Yes, the fact that we love them is blindingly obvious, but even so, it is something we can overlook in our focus on whether or not we are doing the job right. The love we feel (admittedly in varying intensities and shades

over time) is the overwhelmingly powerful force that drives us to try our best for our offspring. It is love in the first place that—literally—brings them to birth, turning us from individuals into beings linked to small others by invisible umbilical cords. And unlike the cords severed in the birthing room, these invisible cords endure for as long as we live.

Many mothers fall in love with their babies at first sight. They experience an instant of intense recognition—‘It’s you!’—and the next few weeks pass in a haze of bliss. ‘I just love those early days,’ said one friend, ‘when they are so tiny and helpless, and it’s really just about the two of you.’ Others have spoken of a tidal wave of love and tenderness when meeting their adoptive child for the first time. Most of us will know women for whom it does not always work like that, however. Fortunately, there are plenty of books, magazines and websites to reassure those who find that embarking on motherhood feels like a blind date, or a marriage that somebody else has arranged with complete disregard for their hobbies, eating habits or sleeping preferences. It can come as a shock to realize that our idea of ‘baby’ may be based on the babies of nappy adverts—peachy-skinned, twinkly-eyed and delightfully interactive—whereas we appear to have produced a pimply Winston Churchill lookalike, with a tendency to overflow at either end and a persistently stormy outlook on life.

In the end, the love does grow, whether in hours, days or weeks. In a poignant moment in the play *Once We Were Mothers* by Lisa Evans (2005), Ali, one of three mothers portrayed, marvels over how she discovers the depth of her love for her Down’s Syndrome daughter, when the baby is six months old. The poet Sylvia Plath, most often remembered for anguished pieces about despair and suicide, wrote lyrically about the intensity of the love of mother for child. Lines from ‘Three Women’ express first of all astonishment at the arrival of baby, who seems a stranger:

*Who is he, this blue, furious boy,
Shiny and strange, as if he had hurtled from a star?*

Then the mood changes as the speaker knows him as her son:

What did my fingers do before they held him?

What did my heart do, with its love?

... I shall not let go.¹

Our love means that we will probably find ourselves delighting in things for which we may previously have shown little interest: the wonder of Baby growing a first tooth, eating two spoonfuls of puréed carrot, waving goodbye, saying ‘Dadda!’ and doing a pea-sized poo in the potty. All being well, our friends and relations will share in our glad tidings without reminding us of our former, perhaps more cynical days.

As our children grow older, our love takes on a different hue, as we no longer have to do everything for them but are responsible for helping them take steps into the wider world. We feel engulfed in tenderness as we assist them to struggle into their very first school uniform, when we watch through a viewfinder as they stumble through a carol at their Christmas concert, when they cross the sports day finishing line in tears because they fell over during the race.

As the years of childhood end (almost overnight, it seems) and they enter adolescence, we find our love changing again as we start to glimpse the adults that they are becoming. All of a sudden, they are playing us music we have not heard of, challenging our assumptions about what constitutes ‘nice clothes’, and introducing us to the new experience of lying awake and listening for their key in the front door. Having been more or less the same size for ages, they start shooting up until they may tower over us, and it gets to the point where they can carry us when we get tired on family walks, rather than vice versa (OK, so a woman can dream).

The invisible cord is still there, proving its remarkable elasticity as it stretches further and further and our children begin the process of moving off into their own lives. It is almost shocking to think about how, after so many years of being around and being our responsibility, they will eventually leave our home (well, most of

them will, depending on the state of the housing market and job prospects...).

Despite the mindboggling series of changes that constitute ‘growing up’, these human creatures remain our children, our special responsibility. And we love them as our children, even if they have now become equals to us, even if they become parents themselves. Think about it: is there anybody else for whom we would be willing to sacrifice our lives, without a second thought?

When loving is hard to do

Before we move on to consider how our experience of love as mothers meshes with the love of God—and the love that the Spirit will grow as fruit in our lives—we need to think further about why some women appear to struggle to love their children at all, when the circumstances of their lives seem to overwhelm their ability to care for others.

It is beyond the scope of this book to deal with the parenting difficulties thrown up by mental illness or by family circumstances necessitating the involvement of social services. We may know women who are caught up in such situations, or we ourselves may be directly affected in some way. Many of us will be able to think of headline-grabbing cases such as pop star Britney Spears losing custody of her children because of her self-destructive behaviour.

As Christians and as mothers, our response to such difficulties should be concern and prayer rather than criticism; we should be open, too, to God calling us to offer practical help via charities involved with vulnerable families, either through financial support or, perhaps, volunteer work. Most mothers, even those caught up in a tragic sequence of addictions, broken relationships and various other traumas, still want the best for their children, but they sometimes lack many of the life-skills necessary to make ‘the best’ even a remote possibility.

If we know, deep down, that our own lives and our own mothering

are in crisis, we need to be brave enough to admit it and call for help. Having a network of supportive family and/or friends (even if they live far away) can make a huge difference with regard to such difficulties. It may be that these people can recognize when we are not coping, and help us start to move towards sorting things out.

Even if we do not have to cope with such challenges, we may discover that becoming a mother is a starting point for revisiting our own childhood experiences. If those experiences were, for whatever reason, more negative than positive, we can start to worry that we will not manage to love our children enough because we ourselves did not feel sufficiently loved when we were young. It is now well documented that children brought up in inadequately staffed institutions or without any kind of stable or loving home environment tend to encounter all kinds of developmental obstacles due to their early lack of stimulation and nurturing care. Knowing this and reflecting on our own experiences, we may feel justified in worrying about whether we are sufficiently equipped to love anybody.

If we find ourselves acknowledging that we suffered some kind of abuse as children, we can set about finding appropriate help so that we can work through the issues and begin to move on. As the best of the recent flood of 'misery memoirs' show, an individual can leave behind dreadful experiences and manage to reach a place of peace and security in adult life. While the pain we have endured as children may not actually rank as criminal abuse, if we realize that it still lingers in our hearts we should take the matter seriously and give ourselves time to heal such emotional scars.

If we review our childhood memories and find less love in our families than we would have liked, it is also worth thinking about whether there were any others who may have cherished us in some way. They may not have been our mothers but an aunt or uncle, grandparent, family friend or neighbour. Remembering and giving thanks for their love will remind us that we were cared for, that we were not completely overlooked, even if our own mothers were always busy with work or other children, or chronically ill or whatever. Nina Bawden's children's book *Carrie's War* gives a flavour of such care in

the portrayal of the wonderful Hepzibah Green, who offers refuge to the central characters from their chilly evacuee household:

*A warm, safe, lighted place. Hepzibah's kitchen was always like that... Coming into it was like coming home on a bitter cold day to a bright, leaping fire. It was like the smell of bacon when you were hungry; loving arms when you were lonely; safety when you were scared.*²

For those who find themselves worrying that they do not feel enough love for their children—or, for some reason, find one child harder to love than another—there are several recent books that explore the interplay of personality types with parenting styles and family life. One such series, written from a Christian perspective but accessible to those from non-faith backgrounds, are the *Five Love Languages* books by Gary Chapman. The key insight (well worth exploring at greater length) is that different personality types express love in different ways—different ‘languages’, as it were. For example, one person may express love by buying gifts while another chooses to do so by spending time with the beloved one. When two people use different ‘languages’ to communicate love to each other, yet fail to understand what is going on, conflict, pain and confusion can occur, whether between husband and wife, parent and child, or friends.

Not only can such an approach help us in our work of mothering, it can also bring insight as we look back to consider how loved we felt as youngsters. What if our own mother had been expressing her love in a ‘language’ that we never appreciated, because our own instincts and preferences were very different? She may have felt that she was showing love by baking us an apple pie, while all the time we were longing to hear a ‘well done’ for the A grade for our French homework.

The God who is love

Over the centuries, many people have made the love of God the focus of a lifetime’s meditation. So much has already been said, sung

and written on this vast subject that we cannot contemplate trying to summarize it here. It is true, however, that reflecting on God's love for us can teach us more about our love as mothers for our children—and vice versa.

Turning the pages of the Bible, we are told repeatedly that God loves us as his children, and some passages use vivid imagery to put across the tenderness of that relationship. This is no stern Victorian patriarch but a hands-on parent: 'It was I who taught Ephraim [another name for Israel] to walk, taking them by the arms... I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them' (see Hosea 11:3–4). We find also, 'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!' (Isaiah 49:15) and 'As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you' (66:13), while Jesus memorably cried out over Jerusalem, 'How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings' (Matthew 23:37).

Interestingly, people are often uncomfortable with the idea of using the word 'mother' in relation to God. Of course, this is in part because of associations with pagan religion (try Googling 'mother god' to see what I mean) but might it also be because the thought of the physical intimacy of a mother's care disturbs us when we envisage it in terms of how God feels about us?

God is beyond gender, limited to neither male nor female characteristics, but at the same time we can look at both men and women to see something of what God is like: 'God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27). And while the convention of orthodox Christian faith is to describe God as 'he' (which is the pronoun used in the Bible), there is much biblical imagery involving the idea of a comforting, caring parent to balance against all the language of the 'Lord mighty in battle'. When we read of the Lord comforting the psalmist (see, for example, 119:76, 82), we probably think in terms of a quick pat on the shoulder from the boss, but why

shouldn't we imagine instead a mother opening her arms to scoop up her crying toddler?

Interestingly, there is a minority view that one of the earliest names for God in the Old Testament, El Shaddai (see, for example, Exodus 6:3), could be derived from the Hebrew *shadayim* (meaning 'breasts'), with connotations of fruitfulness, nurturing and so on. While there is stronger evidence pointing towards other derivations for the title, the possible link reminds us not to overlook those parts of scripture that do depict God as a big, soft, comforting presence.

When we give ourselves the space to reflect that we are loved so intimately by God, when we remind ourselves that his love is not a cold, dutiful emotion but a great wave of warmth and care, when we see that his love for us is infinitely deeper and wider than the love we feel for our own children, then the blessings of his love can begin to be released in our lives. Touched by the tender breath of God, the wind of the Spirit that stirred the primal waters before creation, we can find the fruit of love and goodness forming in our hearts.

What is the exact nature of the love that is described in the Galatians verse? The Greek word used is *agape*, one that implies a depth of selfless concern and compassion, as distinct from friendship, erotic love or simple affection. The apostle Paul wrote what is probably its supreme definition in 1 Corinthians 13, where he declares, 'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails' (vv. 4–8).

Perhaps we read that passage and feel like giving up. After all, could any of us truthfully claim to exhibit such love consistently? Yet this is the very love that the Spirit will grow in our hearts—if we will let him.

Due care and attention

What is the exact nature of the ‘goodness’ that we are promised as another aspect of the fruit of the Spirit? It is not limited to the concept of ‘good enough’ with which we have been wrestling; neither does it restrict ‘good’ to the idea of being morally upright. What the original Greek does convey is a sense of generosity: it is linked to the fact that God’s goodness is seen in the gifts that he gives us, his children.

This brings us back to our foundational principle once again: we love our children and want to be good mothers for them. And what do good mothers do? They provide for their children—give them good things, both tangible and intangible. Our heavenly Father created a perfect home for us, only to have it marred by the rebellion of our race, and within so many of us is a yearning somehow to shield our children from all the pain and complexity of our fallen world. We want to raise them to be able to fulfil everything that they could ever be, and keep them in safety and peace their whole lives long. Then—and only then—will we have been good enough mothers.

When we put it like that, we realize what an impossible task we end up setting ourselves (even though with understandable motives): we actually seek in some way to undo the effects of the Fall for our own children, something that is possible only through the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus. Even though we live as ‘Easter people’, walking in the light of that salvation, we still live in a ‘now and not yet’ situation, waiting for the moment when ‘creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God’ (Romans 8:21).

The way of Christian discipleship and the path of motherhood both last a lifetime. Both involve learning along the way, being honest about our limitations and being willing to ask for the help that we need. While we cannot hope to create a perfect little Eden for our children, we can allow the Spirit to be at work within us, growing the fruit of goodness, of being ‘good enough’ in its sense of ‘generous, loving care’. As we journey along the path of motherhood, we will find ourselves spending our time, resources and energy providing

for our children's needs (please note: I said 'needs', not 'wants'!), both emotional and physical, and preparing them for maturity. We can look after them with 'due care and attention', like a careful driver navigating an unfamiliar carriageway.

The difference between a mother and a random caregiver lies in the nature of the relationship rather than simply the quality of the care or generosity of the giving. We will truly be good enough mothers if our children know deep down that they are special to us, that we love them and that they can trust us to look after them (no matter what they may shout at us sometimes).

So if it is as simple as that, why bother reading the rest of this book? Well, as most of us know, life is rarely straightforward and never exactly simple. As we continue on this long adventure, tackle this lifetime's task, there are many more emotions and issues to trip us up along the way.



For reflection and prayer

Read these words of Paul from Ephesians 3:14–19 and then reread them, changing 'you' to 'me' (or inserting your name) so that it becomes your personal prayer:

I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.