

**FREE 7 DAY
READING PLAN**

Unbound



BY JAMIE SUMNER

UNBOUND: FINDING FREEDOM FROM UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD

7-Day Reading Plan

Summary

Jamie Sumner gives hope and encouragement to all women whose picture of motherhood is strained by difficulty, otherness, and even despair. Women, especially Christian women, do not talk enough about the reality of motherhood: the enormous struggles it takes to get there, the loneliness of it, the unspoken or unmet expectations.

We are often too afraid, ashamed, or unwilling to share our stories of disillusionment or pain. We quietly absorb the posts of sonograms and happily messy houses on Facebook as we inwardly wonder what's the matter with us. We struggle to raise kids with special needs, physical disabilities, and social challenges, caught by surprise that this is what motherhood looks like.

With honesty and vulnerability, Jamie Sumner walks readers down the winding path of motherhood that readers can find comfort, hope, companionship and honesty rooted in biblical truths. This devotional is based on Sumner's book, *Unbound: Finding Freedom from Unrealistic Expectations of Motherhood*.

Day 1: Finicky Hope

GENESIS 18:10-12

10 Then the Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. 11 Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

We do not know how old Sarah was exactly when God visited Abraham to make this declaration of her surprise fertility. But she was old enough to have been described as barren and to have given over her maidservant, Hagar, to bear the fruit that she could not. Old enough to grow desperate. Old enough to grow bitter. Old enough to laugh when God speaks.

I would have done it too. Over the course of our infertility, too many things went wrong for me to consider God unexpectedly generous. Thousands of dollars, hundreds of needles, and a miscarriage had left me suspicious. To be perfectly honest, this was already a fundamental aspect of my nature. A gift certificate for a massage. Thanks, do I seem tense? An extra offer of help at the grocery store. Is my child making too much of a scene? Because I feel like I have to earn people's affection, it takes me off guard when it comes unawares. This is illogical. I know.

When I got pregnant with my first child, I grew hopeful and my view of God grew brighter. All those desert years were mere training, so that I could sing His goodness from the rooftops while

finally round with child. But of course, when we received the news that our son would have special needs, would struggle to live his own life, that view dimmed. God was a trickster. Foolish of me to have thought otherwise. And later, when my twins burrowed into the picture I was done psychoanalyzing God. He had me flummoxed.

I think we all do this. We rationalize away everyday miracles because we don't want to get our hopes up or we are too busy waiting for the next calamity. We can't/won't walk around with our palms open to receive blessings because we don't want to end the day empty-handed, once again the dupe.

Thank goodness God's decisions are not based on my emotional maturity. If God can turn a laughing, snarky Sarah into the mother of the nations, then surely, He can do something with our panicky distrust.

Trust that there are miracles and let yourself be vulnerable enough to spot them.

DAY 2: An Art Lover's Faith

Hebrews 11:13-16

13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted they were aliens and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had the opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one.

Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob. Paul lists them all and their faithful deeds like an exemplary contact list before he gets to this aside. Whenever I read this passage, I feel it in my chest, that balloon expansion as each one performs the necessary act of faith and then receives the reward.

Abel offers the best sacrifice. Noah builds the boat and sees the rainbow. Sarah waits decades and has a baby.

But Cain murders Abel and Noah must start from scratch on the new boggy earth and Sarah dies before she sees substantial proof of the patriarchal branch leading to the future Israelite nation. They listen to God and receive a blessing, but it is the smaller blessing. A slice of the pie.

I could read up to verse thirteen and stop there. Put a period to the happy ending. There's so much good there. But if I'm begrudgingly honest, the rest is the best. It's the whole pie. It's the land we were built for where these tiny stories fit together to make a better scene.

I prayed over my infertility and was blessed with my three children, but we also got cerebral palsy and a wheelchair and twins who must push behind rather than run beside their big brother. Big blessings with bigger wishes yet unmet.

The alien heart in me aches for the place where the three will run together. I want to see it with my own eyes. I want to hug them all while they stand on their own, heights not marked by braces or standers or stools. But I will try to be satisfied today knowing one day we will. The thing that keeps me praying in this world is that there is another one. If this was all there is I think I might not be able to see my way past all the unfulfilled desires and the unfairness.

But that's not the full picture.

It's like the impressionists with their dots. You stand with your nose too close and it looks a jumbled mess. You take a few steps back and it's a lady, a boat, a lake, a masterpiece.

Wherever you are in your motherhood, practice letting these verses elicit hope rather than frustration. And it does take practice. You don't speed-walk through the museum. You sit and stare and let all that wide thinking and talent settle over you. You read every signpost steering you on to the next. You assess each piece from every angle, because each approach is different. And then you go back and visit again on another day in another mood and see even more and leave hoping that some of it rubbed off on you.

DAY 3: Cause and Effect

JOHN 9:1-3

“1 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’

3 ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.’”

I cannot and will not try to tell you how many times people have responded to our mishaps and losses and diagnoses with, “it's all part of God's plan.” It seems like such a pat answer. Yet here Jesus is, explaining to his newbie disciples that this man who has seen neither leaf nor a loaf of bread is all part of the plan. But the disciples' question deserved this exact response.

When we were going through the hard years of infertility, the years filled with pills and shots and ultrasounds and IUIs and IVF and miscarriage, guilt was my biggest emotion. What was I doing that was preventing us from getting pregnant or staying pregnant? What would make the magic happen? Why was God ignoring me?

Then when our son was diagnosed in utero with a rare syndrome and was born at thirty weeks and lived in the NICU for twelve, all I asked was what should I do? When we finally took him home and he was my responsibility, I did not want to miss a step. When he was “officially” diagnosed with cerebral palsy at age one, I took a microscope to every single moment of my pregnancy and delivery to see where I had stepped out of line. All finger pointing was *by me at me*. This is not a healthy response, but I think it's a common one.

All parents feel guilt. We all want ask: Are they happy? Are they safe? Are they thriving? It all feels very active on our part to make their lives liveable.

What I hear now when I read these words from Jesus, is that it's all part of God's plan *to prove that it is not my fault or in my hands*.

We all want to find the base error when something goes awry because we all want a linear cause and effect. God doesn't work that way, or He does, but His line is much longer than ours. Jesus healed the blind man while the disciples watched that day. Not all the wounds, visible or invisible, of our children will be healed in this life. But what a testimony to God's power our children already are. They remind us every day that they belong to something and someone bigger than me.

We cannot always know the cause for the bumps in our path, but we are all called to be part of the effect.

Day 4: The Here and Now

REVELATION 21:4-7

4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

6 He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children."

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

When things were very very hard, when I was very very pregnant and on bedrest, when my son was very very sick or the twins were very very small, I did not long for heaven. I did not catch myself wishing to move on to what will be my permanent home. It was all too intense. My nose was too close to the book, in the thick of the plot. To take a step back and trace the curve and take in the illustrations seemed impossible.

When you're living minute to minute, you don't really stop to ponder the big stuff, because the little stuff is big enough.

But now, when things are less intense, or more accurately, intense in a different way, I catch myself thinking about heaven more. Not the golden streets and mansions with many rooms, but the sweet hereafter where I will sing (in a better voice than I have now) praises to God and feel the lasting peace that we are all ultimately happy, safe and loved. It's not wishful thinking, because it's not a wish. It's not like blowing on a dandelion.

It is the greater reality.

And that's when it rings true.

When I catch sight of the tips of lilies nudging out of the mulch that I planted on faith last fall, I think it. Oh *heaven*. Right. I am coming nearer. I am that nubby bulb, reaching up to the sun, but it's all still murky. The earth that is providing the nutrients and the experience will also provide the friction which will help me shed that tough outer layer. When I arrive in the sun, Jesus can rinse me clean.

It's when I'm happiest that I remember heaven. When my children and my marriage are well, when winter gives way to the warmth of spring, I sense good things ahead. All of it points to something that's going to be even better. It stirs my cravings for the rest of the meal, for the course beyond the appetizer, for when we get to see "everything new" and for when we get to be with Christ who "is [our] life" until the end.

C.S. Lewis once wrote in *The Weight of Glory*,

"Our natural experiences (sensory, emotional, imaginative) are only like the drawing, like pencilled lines on flat paper. If they vanish in the risen life, they will vanish only as pencil lines vanish from the real landscape, not as a candle flame that is put out but as a candle flame which becomes invisible because someone has pulled up the blind, thrown open the shutters, and let in the blaze of the risen sun."

Sometimes we get a glimpse of the sunrise. It's the warm glow before the brilliant light. It's designed to get us longing to go and be with Jesus. This is what gets us through the here and now, when the kids or the marriage isn't going to well. The memories of warmth and the promise of a future work together to keep us walking steadily through the present.

Day 5: The Insecurity of Motherhood

GENESIS 29:16-18

16 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. **17** Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. **18** Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel."

GENESIS 29:22-25

22 So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. **23** But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. **24** And Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant. **25** When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?"

GENESIS 29:31-32

31 When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. 32 Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, “It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.”

There’s a reason no one thinks back on their junior high years and says, *“those were the glory days.”* Those middling years are terrible. You do not know who you are anymore. Your thoughts are erratic and often not your own. *“That guy is so cute! Is he looking at me? No, of course he’s not. Why would anyone look at me?”* Or better yet, *“Is that girl looking at me? What’s wrong with me? Are these jeans completely gross?”*

Not only do you feel like a crazy person, but you feel like you’re the only one. Everyone else has already figured out how to play this game while you are lagging behind. Oh, and you don’t recognize your own body anymore. It’s changing so fast it gives you vertigo. By the time we reach high school, college, marriage, etc, we are more than ready to leave that era behind.

Here’s the thing. Motherhood is a lot like returning to middle school. All of a sudden you are back to square one at figuring out how to live life. You look around at the sea of other mothers and catch yourself wondering, *“It that mom looking at me? What am I doing wrong? Are these jeans completely gross?”* And the vertigo thing still applies. Your body is not what is used to be.

I thought I would be past the need to compete by the time I became a mother. Been there. Done that. I had the degree, the husband, the job, the house, the car. It had to be enough right? But suddenly I was all over the place again. Everything felt tenuous.

Each time I read the story of Rachel and Leah, I look for hope. Because it just seems so sad. Leah, the plain. Rachel the beauty. Leah the fruitful. Rachel the barren. Back and forth they fought over Jacob. *“Here, take my servant and have children with her.” “No, take mine!”* Jacob must have really been something. The competition must have been exhausting. In the end, between them and their servants, they gave Jacob thirteen children. Not a bad way to start a lineage.

But it’s not a way to live.

Competition between mothers and the ensuing insecurity stems from a good place. We want to see what’s working for others. We want to raise our children the best we can. We want them to thrive. It’s when this desire turns us away from looking to God for our answers that things start to slip.

Just like middle school, *no one* has it all together in this mothering game. Rachel and Leah eventually made peace with each other when they left their father’s land. That’s what it often takes to drop the gloves: exposure to vulnerability. We all need this. If I could talk to my twelve-year-old self, I would tell her: *“Honey, it’s okay. No one else gets it either.”* And as I talk to other moms, I say the exact same thing.

Day 6: Stable Living

LUKE 2:16-20

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

I never slept much in the twelve weeks Charlie was in the NICU or the six when the twins were. Life on that ward is an odd one. You run off a clock set by shifts and care times and dipping and spiking oxygen levels and heart rates. It is a life on the edge for you and for your child.

Mary got it. She walked that edge from the time she discovered that she was pregnant. She did not know if Joseph would still marry her. And if he did, she did not know what those wedding plans, the ones she had probably been dreaming up, would look like now. Would it be a secret marriage, just as Jesus was still a secret? And then when the census rolled around and she rode a donkey all the way to Bethlehem (my sciatic nerve hurts just thinking about it), what would she do when labor started? There was no birthing suite at Bethlehem Memorial waiting for her.

Yet because of this chain of events and her willingness to be a participant, she birthed a miracle and the shepherds spread the news and she would remember it all. But Mary did not do this by sheer force of will. God worked something in her and He can work something supernatural in you so that you will react to circumstances in ways you never thought possible.

As I look back on those times in the NICU, I see the moments where God took over. I see when I reacted blessedly against character. As mothers, God gives us preternatural calm and strength and love and hope just when we need it. But not a moment before.

Stable living is not “steady living.” It is neither even nor predictable nor in our control. It keeps us *un*-steady. But this is so that we remember our plans might be good, but God’s are greater. To be stable as mothers we must trust despite circumstances. We fight daily to raise humans who will follow God no matter what. The best way to do this is to do it ourselves.

DAY 7: On Perseverance and Middle Age

GALATIANS 6:9

9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

I’m approaching middle age...tiptoeing up and peering under the door and wondering over it. But, chances are, when the door swings open it’s going to look a lot like where I’m standing

now. Identical living room and life with different messes in the middle.

People talk about middle age like it's the Middle Ages with plagues and pitfalls and drudgery with no enlightenment in sight. And I understand this. Because up until then, we've been crashing through life, conquering one milestone after another: school, more school, jobs, more jobs, single living, married living, kids. And then there's the long slow deep breath that is middle age where mostly it is all still the same, but a longer stretch.

This, I think, is why the "midlife crisis" is a thing. People aren't good at the long stretches where you can't sprint and can't see the finish line. It wears on a soul. And this makes sense. We were made for change. It's why we have seasons and day and night and apples in autumn and strawberries in summer. We like variety.

Perhaps though, middle age is the most like faith. Faith is, as we know, believing in what we cannot see and certainly cannot always feel. Jesus is not actually visible, squeezing our hands, and so we must continue to do the good He calls us to without direct feedback.

Paul knew those early Christians were getting tired of "doing good" without Jesus to high five them. He grew tired himself. There's a lot of downtime in prison. I'm sure the stillness wore on him.

As mothers, it's the daily tasks that get you. The sameness. The 53rd packed lunch. The 8th tantrum of the day. The dentist appointments and 5th grade math and the long stretch between Christmas break and Spring break. It is so hard not let the weight of time drag us down as we slog between milestones, waiting for potty training, fearfully approaching puberty, looking around the empty nest.

So many times in these middling years, it feels like we are standing still. But there is so much going on under the surface that we cannot see. What God asks of us is to keep living and tending the life we've been given. The harvest is not ready yet, and so we must continue on, pulling the weeds up here and there and waiting and watching and tilling and turning the soil.