

the
HOPE
we hold

FINDING PEACE IN THE
PROMISES OF GOD

Jinger & Jeremy Vuolo

with Bethany Mauger



New York • Nashville

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Chapter Three

In the Public Eye

Jinger

“Wait. What’s a reality show?”

I looked around at my brothers and sisters, wondering if anyone else was as confused as I was. The tilted heads and twisted faces around the living room told me no one had a clue what those words meant.

It was 2008, and my dad called all of us kids to the living room for a family meeting. I expected his big news to be that TLC was making another documentary about our family. When our first special became one of Discovery Health’s top-rated shows, they asked us to make three more. *On the Road with 16 Children* detailed a cross-country trip our family took, *16 Children and Moving In* showed us putting the finishing touches on and moving into the house we’d had custom built to meet the unique needs of a family our size, and *Raising 16 Children* showed how my parents managed it all. By now, I didn’t mind the cameras, and the crew members felt like old friends. I smiled as I thought of seeing Scott, Deanie, and Kirk again.

But it wouldn’t be another documentary this time, Dad said. TLC didn’t want to make another one-hour special. This time, the network wanted to make a reality show about our family.

All of us stared at Dad as if he had suddenly started speaking a foreign language. The rest of America was quite familiar with reality shows by this point in time, but I didn't generally watch TV. Our family's television continued to gather dust in a closet somewhere. Still, I could tell that whatever this was, it was a big deal.

"How is a show different from what we've already done?" one of my brothers asked.

Dad, who didn't exactly watch much TV himself, took a moment before he answered. "Well, the shows will be a lot more frequent," he said. "We'll have cameras in our house more often. The way I understand it, we won't be doing anything special when the crew comes. They'll follow us around while we do whatever it is we have planned for the day."

"We need to pray about it," my mom added. "We need to make sure the filming won't interrupt our daily life or work."

"But we also believe this is an opportunity." Dad looked around the living room, making eye contact with each of us. "We have a chance to tell the world about Christ right in their living rooms, all because somebody wants to give us a television show."

TLC named our show *17 Kids and Counting*—a name that changed a few times as we welcomed new babies into the family. We smiled and greeted Scott and the crew with hugs as they set up cameras and boom microphones. Then, the cameras followed us as we built a garden in the backyard or the boys worked on a truck. It seemed easy enough, especially since no one had to tell me over and over again not to look at the camera. I thought maybe a reality show wouldn't change our lives so much, given that we had already been on television.

Nothing could have prepared me for the floodgates that flew open when the show began to air. Suddenly, it seemed like everybody in the world knew my name. Whether I was licking an ice cream cone at Braum's

or loading a cart with cans at Aldi, I heard someone whisper, “That’s her! That’s Jinger!” I felt strangely on display, like people knew something about me that I didn’t.

My younger brothers and sisters frowned with confusion when strangers said hello to them. “How do they know my name, Mom?” they asked.

Mom smiled. “Well, they watch our lives on TV,” she explained.

Mom taught us to be gracious when we met fans of the show, even if they didn’t quite know what to say. “Wow, you’re a lot thinner than you look on TV!” I heard more than once. I laughed at that comment. They weren’t wrong. I’d watched the show myself, and the saying that the camera adds ten pounds is all too true.

Fans of the show often asked to take pictures with me. “Do the thumbs-up!” someone inevitably said before the camera snapped. I gritted my teeth and smiled as I obliged them. I knew they were referring to our show’s opening credit sequence. For some reason, I gave the camera a thumbs-up when they filmed my shot. I had no idea why, since it’s not something I normally do. That one impulsive gesture became my accidental trademark.

As TLC ordered more seasons, I became known as the girl with a million expressions, apparently because of my exaggerated faces. People even called me the “rebel Duggar,” which was funny considering I wanted nothing more than to please my parents. It was all because of one offhand comment I made on camera about how I love the city and enjoy visiting it. That innocent statement turned into entire Reddit threads about how I wanted to move away from my family and lead an exciting life in the big city. Even people I met when I was out and about mentioned it from time to time. *But I’m a teenager!* I thought incredulously. *I’m not going anywhere!*

I didn’t let the falsehoods faze me. I knew in my heart what was true, and no one could change that. Instead, I learned to be careful. I learned

to think before speaking, to consider how what I was about to say might look splashed across the cover of a grocery store tabloid. I learned to listen carefully to questions I was asked in interviews for the show and to think through how my answer could be twisted to play up drama. I learned I shouldn't roll my eyes or make a face when the cameras were around—though sometimes it was hard to resist. Once I knew people thought it was funny, I definitely played up my facial expressions on occasion.

Watching myself on TV was bizarre. I was in my awkward teenage years, and I cringed when I saw my hair frizzing in the Arkansas humidity or a shirt that looked less than flattering, even though I had changed my clothes three times before the cameras arrived that day. I liked to think of myself as mature beyond my years, and my cheeks burned when I heard myself say something that made me sound like a kid. *Oh, why did I say that?* I thought. I made up my mind to say as little as possible when the cameras were around. I thought the less I said, the more mature I looked. That made for even more awkward interviews.

I wanted to believe that my friends saw me the same way they always had. After all, I was the same person I'd been before the cameras entered my life. And yet, there was tension. Though no one said anything to my face, I knew some of their families thought it wasn't holy to be on TV, and that made me feel uncomfortable.

Mom listened sympathetically when I told her about another strained conversation with a friend. "Maybe they're jealous, Jinge," she said.

I looked up in surprise. How could these girls be jealous of me?

"Some of your friends live in families a lot like ours," Mom continued. "They might be wondering why you're on TV and they're not. Especially when being on TV means your family gets to take exciting trips and do exciting things just so the crew can film an episode. Put yourself in their shoes."

I nodded slowly. I knew she was right. Still, I couldn't change the fact that my family had a TV show. "But what do I do?" I asked.

"I try to avoid mentioning the show as much as I can." Mom looked into my eyes, her gentle voice serious. "It's not the focus of our lives. We don't need to include it in our conversations with friends."

"How do you do that? I mean, the cameras are at our house so much."

"Well, when somebody asks what I did yesterday, I tell them I went shopping or had coffee with Grandma Duggar," she said. "I don't mention that the crew was there too."

Mom gave me a hug and smiled. "Be a sweet friend. Even when it's hard."

I took Mom's words to heart. I knew they were wise and necessary. They were also much harder than I thought they would be. I found myself mentally editing my stories and leaving out major pieces of information as I tried not to make my friends feel less than or left out. Even exciting news, like whether my pregnant mom was having a boy or girl, had to be kept under wraps if it hadn't yet been shared on the show. Conversations with anyone outside my family left me feeling as if I were holding back, unable to fully be myself.

At the same time, I knew it wasn't easy to be my friend. Girls I invited over for a cookout in the backyard might be asked to step to the side so they weren't in a shot. I felt terrible as I watched them sit in folding chairs near the side of the room instead of on a sofa, trying to avoid the cameras. Sometimes I wanted to shout, "Can we please not film today?" I wouldn't have blamed them for finding an excuse not to accept my next invitation to come over, or slowly fading into the background of my life, but some stayed faithful. They stuck by me and my family even when it was difficult or painful, even when our circumstances kept us from being as close as we once had been.

It wasn't long before I learned there was another kind of friend entirely. The kind who was all too eager for an invitation to my house. The kind that asked, not so subtly, if the crew would be there when I asked them to come over, or even showed up uninvited when they knew we were filming. The kind that quoted something I said on the show as if she had been there. I wanted to trust everybody with open arms, but I couldn't help but eye these girls with suspicion. *Do you genuinely care about me?* I thought, looking at her face intently. *Do you really want to be my friend? Or is it all about the show?*

"Yes, these people might be here for the wrong reasons," Mom said when we vented our frustrations. "But we need to be loving anyway."

Mom and Dad were quite serious about showing love. They opened their arms to everyone, even the most rabid fans, at least in the beginning. Family after family wrote to us and sent us e-mails asking if they could visit. Many were families with a lot of kids who planned to travel in our direction and wanted to stop by for dinner or even to stay the night. Mom and Dad said yes as often as they could.

It wasn't that I minded giving up my bed to sleep on a couch or eating with strangers. Most of us kids enjoyed the company and thought it was exciting to meet someone new. My complaint was the dinner I knew we'd be served. Inevitably, when Mom checked with a visitor to find out what they liked to eat, they would say, "We aren't picky, but we'd love some of that tater tot casserole."

Mom had fixed us that meal for years, but since it was featured in our first documentary, it had become the Duggar family signature meal. As families streamed in and out of our house, I grew to the point of feeling sick looking at the concoction of tater tots, ground turkey, and cream of mushroom soup.

Most visits were sweet times of fellowship with Christian families.

We had a few odd visits here and there, like the family that complained our house smelled of bleach and immediately ran through the main floor opening all the windows. But nothing deterred Mom and Dad from opening our home to strangers—until the diary incident.

It was Fourth of July weekend, and several friends and family members had planned to visit, when a college student wrote asking if she could stop by. “I watch your show, and I’d love to come and meet your beautiful family,” her e-mail said. Mom and Dad thought she sounded sweet, so they welcomed her in like they did most anyone else.

By now, we had an entire routine for when fans visited. Whether they were staying the night or for dinner, we almost always started with a tour of the house. All of us were prepared to herd tour groups to the girls’ room, the boys’ room, the laundry room, and the massive pantry. When the college girl visited that Fourth of July weekend, she accompanied one of my brothers as well as a few other visitors on a tour. No one questioned the backpack she wore, and she seemed nice enough. She left as the day wound to a close, and I didn’t give the matter another thought. That is, until a month and a half later, when I heard Dad call my name over the house’s intercom system.

“Jinger, can you come up to the office, please?” his voice echoed off the tile floors of the kitchen.

I climbed the stairs and found him sitting in front of his computer, a confused sort of half smile on his face.

“Hey, Jinge,” he said, uncertain how to begin. “This is really funny. Maybe the funniest thing I’ve seen in a while. But, somebody’s claiming to have your journal.”

I stared at him in disbelief. What he said couldn’t be possible. My diary was safely in my dresser where I always kept it. Wasn’t it?

“One of my friends sent me this eBay listing.” Dad grabbed his mouse

and clicked on the Internet browser. “This looks like yours, doesn’t it? Whoever has it is trying to sell it for \$100,000.”

A creepy feeling overwhelmed me as I leaned forward and squinted at the computer screen. There it was. I had no doubt that was my diary. *Are you kidding me?* I thought, feeling completely violated. *Who’s been in my bedroom?*

The person who created the ad posted a picture not only of the cover, but also of a page I’d written inside. I was mortified. Not because of anything I’d written—when you have eighteen siblings, you learn pretty quick not to write anything deeply personal in a book a sibling could get their hands on. I was much more embarrassed by my terrible handwriting. Girls are supposed to have pretty, dainty cursive, with *i*’s dotted with hearts. My writing looked more like a ten-year-old boy’s.

“This is crazy,” Dad said. “We have to figure out who did this.”

Word spreads fast in a family as big as ours. Dad and I were still in the office brainstorming who might be the culprit as the older kids overheard us and ran into the office.

We were stumped. We knew plenty of strangers had been in and out of our house. We tried to remember who might have acted shifty or wandered off by themselves at any point during a tour. No one had any leads.

“Where is this person from?” somebody shouted. “Who’s the seller?”

The seller’s name was unlisted, but the location wasn’t. At first, the little Wisconsin town didn’t ring any bells. Then, one of my brothers’ eyes lit up.

“Wait, wait, wait,” he said, quieting the rest of us down. “The only person I can think of from Wisconsin is that girl who visited back at the Fourth of July. What was her name?”

A quick search of Dad’s e-mail revealed the girl’s contact information. There in her address was the same little town from the eBay listing.

“That’s her,” we immediately said. “No one else could have done this.”

Dad was completely calm as he e-mailed the college girl to say she needed to return the diary, or she’d be prosecuted. She responded right away, to my surprise.

“I’m sending it back,” she said. “I didn’t read it, don’t worry.” That statement wasn’t overly comforting, given that she’d posted a picture of my open diary on the Internet.

True to her word, though, the diary arrived a few days later, along with a DVD. We watched in fascination as the DVD played a fifteen-minute recording of the girl apologizing to us. The whole incident was enough to convince my parents that maybe we needed to be more careful about who we allowed in our house.

Yet even when it would have been easy to become cynical, Mom and Dad pointed us back to Christ. Yes, these situations were unusual at best. But these were the trials that come with being blessed with a platform. Mom and Dad reminded us that our platform also brought us untold joy and opportunities to share the love of Christ. The stacks of fan mail we received also included letters from women in abusive relationships, kids without loving homes, people in situations I couldn’t even fathom. Somehow, they saw our show and saw hope. They saw the light of Jesus shining in us and wanted what we had. People wrote to us to share that they gave their lives to Christ because they watched our show. Everywhere I went, I heard from someone whose life had been changed because of our impact.

In those moments, I knew that whatever discomfort I experienced was worth it. That my momentary problems were so minor in light of eternity. For reasons I still don’t understand, God gave me and my family a voice to reach the masses. Our job was to guard ourselves from pride and stay faithful. It wasn’t easy. But it was worth it.