

Mom Guilt: Escaping Its Strong Hold



by LAUREN WHITMAN

The first time I struggled with mom guilt was on the very day that I became a mother.

As many pregnant mothers do, I had carefully crafted a birth plan for my daughter's hospital delivery. In the months leading up to my due date, I did hours of research. I talked to my doctor. I talked to other mothers. I wrote and refined the draft of the plan. I printed out copies of it for anyone who would need it at the hospital. I was ready. I fully expected that all would go according to plan.

But all did not go according to plan. And in my first days of motherhood, I struggled. I had failed. My birth plan represented what I had conceived of as *the best* for my baby's entrance into the world, and I had failed to give that to her. And so in the months of learning to be a mom and focusing on my newborn, I was simultaneously fixating on this failure.

This was my grim entrance into the experience of mom guilt. I soon discovered it could be pervasive, intruding into any situation or

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decision regarding my child. Mom guilt has many faces, and the burden can be heavy. Here are a few ways we can experience the weight of its condemnation:

- From our own self-evaluations: *I'm failing as a mom. I am not good enough.* It can sound like this: "I wasn't able to produce enough milk to breastfeed. My baby isn't getting what is best for him and it's my fault."
- From our struggles with motherhood: *I didn't know being a mom would feel so hard all the time. Why do I find my kids so difficult?*
- From our sense of responsibility for everything that goes wrong. This starts when our kids are young but grows along with them. We often feel responsible for our children's poor choices. This is especially true when they are young adults and their choices have bigger, more public consequences. It's easy to have a growing list of "if only I had done this...or that..."

From these examples, we see that *mom guilt* can be used to describe diverse situations and internal struggles. Here, then, is a definition for this experience:

Mom guilt is a hyper-awareness of the "shoulds" of parenting and fixates on ways you see yourself failing. This everyday experience is persistent, and even faith in Jesus doesn't seem to quiet these feelings of inadequacy.

In this definition, notice that mom guilt is different from true, biblical guilt. True guilt comes after we have sinned. Of course, there are daily instances when moms sin against their kids. For example, if I'm angry at my child's behavior, shame her, and feel guilty after I do, then my guilt is actually helpful, as it can lead me to repent before the Lord and seek my child's forgiveness for my harshness. God allows us to feel guilt so that we do something important and necessary: confess and repent to him and to those we have hurt. But the mom guilt I'm talking about is different. It is false and deceptive guilt that fills our thoughts and impacts how we feel about ourselves and our mothering. It is a form of suffering, and my goal is to locate how God helps moms escape from the strong hold of mom guilt.

Because mom guilt covers a wide range of experiences, it can be confusing to discern what gives rise to it. So first we will identify common

roots of mom guilt. Doing so will help us understand what is happening when we feel it. Second, we will uncover a biblical perspective on those roots, which then helps guide our responses. Finally, I'd like for you to ask someone close to you—your husband, a close friend, or a relative—to read this article. I have included a note to that person on the last page so that you can have their help.

Common Roots of Mom Guilt

Just as tree roots provide a base of support to a tree's trunk and branches, the roots of mom guilt support its growth in our hearts. Here are four common roots of mom guilt.

Root #1: Our flawed view of our limitations. Every person is limited in what they are able to do. We are creatures and not the Creator, and therefore we cannot do all things. Furthermore, we are creatures who differ in ability from each other. An ability that comes easily to one mom might not come easily to another mom, and all of this is out of our control. We don't always interpret our own set of limitations this way, however. Sometimes moms are tempted to interpret limitations as personal failures—as if we should be capable in every way. This is an unattainable expectation! This keeps the mom who did not produce enough breast milk stuck in mom guilt. She interprets this as a personal failure of hers and berates herself about it.

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Similarly, a flawed view of limitations keeps a working mom in mom guilt. When she can't make it to her teenager's soccer game because of work obligations, she feels guilty even though her job is part of what provides for the family's needs. As much as moms would love to be in two places at once, we can't be.

Root #2: False standards. There are two categories of standards when it comes to measuring our "success" as moms—those we create ourselves and those imposed upon us. Let's look at both.

First, we generate our own standards. We create an image of an ideal mom based on who we want or wish to be as a mother. Maybe your

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