

DON'T MESS *With This* MAMA

Risking It All to Rescue Our Daughter



A TRUE STORY

MISSY MAXWELL WORTON

FOREWORD BY CHRIS OVERSTREET

Chapter 22

GOD I LOOK TO YOU

“A Champion is someone who gets up when he can’t.”

—Jack Dempsey, professional boxer

The next morning, I woke up before the sun, singing the song, “God I look to You.” I had sung it several times, but this morning it came from a deep and desperate place—it was my heartfelt prayer. I was at the bottom of what seemed like an impossible situation looking up, and I needed vision beyond what my physical eyes could see or my mind could understand.

Just being in God’s presence put me at peace. As I kept worshipping God, I could feel myself being drawn into the Throne Room where Jesus took my hand and let me rest in His arms. As I was resting, He showed me a vision with two paths. I couldn’t fully grasp its meaning at the time, nor did I want to see all of it in my pain. Still, the vision was a loving encouragement that I was where I needed to be. This journey was not only about us—it was about what God would do through us. When I came out of the vision, I knew that if I gave in to the thoughts of defeat and depression, I would only be strengthening the enemy and, in the end, lose what I was fighting for. I was determined that every time a negative thought would come in, I would pray that I would have strength to take it captive. Then I would set my mind on the promises of God, focus on what He has done for us, and remember what he has called us to do. I prayed that every beat of my heart would beat for Him, that every word spoken from my mouth would glorify Him, and that my tongue would be used only for worship and gratitude to Him. Thankfulness would be the oil that fueled my survival.

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Mark woke up, and we laid in bed, watching the sun rise on the wall. Birds were singing outside our bedroom window—a new day dawned, and with the new day came hope.

I glanced at my computer. I had written to our prayer warriors the night before, asking for wisdom and sharing the hurt and frustration we were feeling. We knew we were being refined, and it was painful, but we also knew that somehow we were in the middle of God’s perfect will. Our prayer warriors’ responses, prayers, and encouragement lifted our spirits. I could feel the shift in my soul after reading their replies.

“We need to make the most of this,” I said to Mark. “We’re here for at least two more weeks, and we need to use the time well. We should plan things to do with the girls and use this opportunity to bond with Favor.”

“I agree,” Mark said. “I need to get some money wired to us too. We’re almost out.” At this point, money wasn’t an obstacle. Mark and I knew God had it taken care of, and what usually would stop us, wasn’t even a pebble in our shoe.

“I want to go see Bonnke!” I said, changing the subject, remembering that Pochi and Pastor invited us to go with them to see this evangelist and world changer. “I heard that he’s raised people from the dead! Wherever he seems to go, miracles happen. I need to be in that atmosphere!”

“Okay, I’ll reach out to Dave, but I don’t think we should take the girls,” Mark said. “There’s too big of a crowd. I don’t know who’s watching us right now. I’d feel better if we left them with Jody and Pat.”

He was right. We would be distracted by watching the girls and not get a thing out of the service. At this point, we also didn’t know how desperate Adefere was to get Favor back into his hands and out of ours. We decided that we were better safe than sorry.

Mark checked the computer. “Hey,” he said in relief, “McKenzie’s school got back with us. They said, ‘There is no better life lesson they could teach her than what she is learning at this very moment.’ They just want a full, written report of her experience in Ethiopia when she returns.”

“She could probably write a novel,” I said. I was so relieved. The thought of Mark leaving me to do court on my own, and saying goodbye to McKenzie, was too difficult to add to my emotional weakness. All we wanted to do was be a family—all six of us. The night before, I had not done well telling the boys that it would be possibly up to another two weeks. I was so proud of how brave they were and the strength they showed. It made me miss them all the more.

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The next few days were filled with activities that were being held at The Academy. An Ethiopian track meet is something to behold, and The Academy was hosting one. Ethiopians are beautiful, fast runners!

While I was chasing down Favor and stopping her from joining the races, Mark and McKenzie got us some chocolate-covered ice cream to eat. You would’ve thought we had won the lottery, but by the second bite, we knew these desserts weren’t anything like the ice cream at home. I’m not sure that there was either cream or chocolate in the ingredients, but we were desperate, so we consumed the ice cream in record time and got more for later.

I went with Jody and some of the women who lived at The Academy to get groceries. This outing always included several stops around town to get things on our list. I still couldn’t believe that I could walk away with bags of vegetables and fruits for under six U.S. dollars. I bought avocados, mangos, oranges, potatoes, carrots, bananas, and eggs—all of which were organic and fresh. After we got back to the apartment, I gave them a chlorine bath, dried them off, and placed them in my makeshift fruit baskets.

After dinner, we walked down to the gym. Favor was running around with her arms thrown back and her new red scarf flowing behind her. I pulled out my camera and took a quick shot of this beautiful picture of freedom. McKenzie taught us all a few tips in volleyball, but we seemed only to frustrate her when we tried them. We were pathetic. We took a stroll around the compound and headed back to our apartment.

I’m not sure what happened next, but I believe it was the moment that McKenzie and Favor became true sisters. They had a screaming match, and before we could find out what had happened, McKenzie walked out the door, slamming it behind her. Favor curled up on the couch and started crying, while Mark and I stood across the room, staring at each other.

“Do girls always act this way?” Mark asked. I shot him a quick “really?” look.

“I guess I need to go find McKenzie. You stay here and comfort the little one,” I said.

“Okay,” Mark said. He looked like a deer caught in headlights.

I ran downstairs and looked around the teacher’s lobby and everywhere I could think of. No luck. I started walking back to our apartment, looking in every corner to find her. *God, please show me where she is.* When I got to the steps that led up to our room, I remembered the attic where we hung our clothes to dry.

When I looked up the narrow staircase to the attic, my first thought was that she wouldn’t have gone up there alone—it was too dark and scary.

“McKenzie?” I called. No answer. But there was a strong pull that kept me moving forward. The only light was behind me as I walked toward the darkness. I got to the top of the steps and fumbled to find anything that resembled a light switch. I walked with unsure steps, my hands reaching out in front of me. I could imagine stepping off of the floored area and dropping in on the apartment underneath me. Finally, I found a string to pull. My eyes struggled to adjust as I looked around.

There, huddled in the corner, sitting on the floor, I found McKenzie, crying. Without a word I walked over and sat next to her, taking her in my arms, as I had done so often. I had no words, so I let her cry. Maybe she had come to her breaking point and just needed to let it out and be a little girl. She had been so strong and grown up through all of this.

“I hate this!” she said through tears. “I hate this, I want to go. I miss my brothers and my friends back home.”

“I know you do. I’m sorry,” I said.

“I miss my kitten,” she sniffled. “He’s probably all grown up now. You and dad expect me to be so strong, but I’m not. Why can’t we just go home? I hate it here!”

In my fear to not be left alone to fight in court, I hadn’t fully considered what this trip had done to McKenzie. I realized how selfish I had been. I knew that no matter how much I didn’t want to send her home, it was probably the best choice for her.

“McKenzie,” I said, “Dad can take you back home. Only one of us needs to stay.”

“Why do you have to stay?” she asked.

“Because we can’t leave Favor,” I said. “The last time we left her we almost lost her for good. We can’t risk that again, but Dad can take you home. You have been so strong and have helped us out so much with her. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you.”

“No,” she said, “I don’t want to leave you—or Favor. But, she’s a brat.”

I had to laugh. “No way! You’re telling me she’s just a normal little sister? She’s not perfect?”

“Ugh,” McKenzie said, as she wiped away her tears with her shirt sleeve. “She cries the moment she doesn’t get her way. Don’t get me wrong, I love her, but she is so annoying.”

“She’s a little girl,” I reassured her, “and that’s a little sister’s job.”

“Well, she’s good at it,” she said.

“Hi Mommy!” I looked up to see Favor. She had snuck up while McKenzie and I had been talking, and was standing in between the slats, with no floor boards protecting her from breaking through to the floor below.

“Favor!” I yelled as I reached to grab her, “you can’t walk on that. You could’ve been hurt!” I was talking loud, and I could see in her eyes that she was frightened. I took a breath and pulled her in for a hug. “I’m sorry—you scared me, Baby.” I got down where I could look her directly in the eyes,

“Favor, that is dangerous. I pointed to the open space where she could have fallen through. “You have to stay on this.” I then pointed to the floor beneath us. She nodded her head like she understood, and then hugged me.

Suddenly, we heard a sound coming from the corner. I turned and looked, but couldn’t see anything. “Ah, Mom, did you hear that?” McKenzie asked.

“I did,” I answered.

McKenzie looked at me with big eyes. “What is it?”

We both looked in the direction of the sound. We could hear something moving toward us, I started recalling everything Jody had said about the mongoose that lived up in the attic. The last thing we needed was to get attacked by a territorial mongoose with rabies.

We scrambled down the steps as quickly as our feet would take us, screaming and giggling the whole way back to the apartment. We were having so much fun laughing together, even though we were terrified and probably looking ridiculous! Favor ran screaming through the apartment door and shut it behind her, leaving McKenzie and me standing outside the apartment, continuing to laugh.

“I am so proud of you,” I said, looking into McKenzie’s big hazel eyes. “You have been such a big girl through all of this. I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Mom. Thanks.”

I gave her a hug. I didn’t want to let go, and by the way she held me, I knew the feeling was mutual, so we held on a little while longer.

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We walked into the apartment to find Mark and Favor setting up the memory game. McKenzie walked over to Favor and gave her a hug.

“I’m sorry,” McKenzie said.

Favor hugged her sister as hard as her little arms could bear it. “Sorry, Kenzie,” she said, and all was well—at least for now.

Mark looked up at me and smiled with relief that our girls were happy again. I brushed off his smile and went to my computer, turning my back on him.

“Everything okay?” Mark asked cautiously.

“No,” I snapped back, “everything is not okay.” I knew I was holding resentment against him, but I wasn’t ready to let it go or deal with it. The wound was still fresh in my heart, and now I had just experienced my daughter’s pain, and I was mad at him. “We’d rather be home right now, but that didn’t happen,” I said.

Mark sat wounded, unable to make things right and afraid things might only get worse. His heart was breaking. With tears burning his eyes and emotion taking over his ability to speak, he walked out of the apartment without a word.

“Where’s Dad going?” McKenzie asked.

“Don’t know,” I responded.

“Is he okay?” McKenzie asked. “Should I go after him?”

“Nope,” I said.

“Are you going to go after him?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

The room was silent as McKenzie stared at me, beckoning me to go after him.

“He needs alone time right now,” I said.

“I’m worried about Dad. He doesn’t look good,” she said.

“He’ll be okay, McKenzie. He just needs to eat.”

Mark had closed the apartment door behind him. He sat down on the steps and began to weep. He felt separated and alone. He needed a friend, and so he reached out to one of his best friends, David Estes, on FaceTime.

David looked down and saw Mark’s call coming in. Until now they had only communicated through Facebook and text messages. Eager to talk to him and see him face-to-face, he answered the call, hoping to hear good news. But what he saw on the other side was a skeleton of the friend he had dropped off at the airport a few weeks ago. Staring back at him was a broken man. David could see Mark had been crying and was on the verge of breaking. His face was hollow, and he looked as if he was sick and had lost 30 pounds. The weight of sadness that hung onto him made David fear that the worst had happened.

“Hey friend,” David said.

Mark struggled to smile and say something, but only managed a nod.

“How’s it going?” David asked, knowing it could be a report he didn’t want to hear.

Mark’s lip began to quiver, “Not good,” he said.

“I’m so sorry,” David said. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Mark looked away and shook his head, fighting back the emotions that were pushing to get out. “I just can’t do this anymore. I don’t know how much more I can take.” His exhaustion was apparent.

David had no words as he listened to his friend pour out the pain and remorse, which had clearly been beating him up for days.

“I should’ve just listened to her and gotten us out of Ethiopia when she was begging me to leave,” Mark’s voice began to quiver. “We wouldn’t be in this mess...we’d be home right now. I should’ve listened to her. Because of what I decided to do, we could lose Favor. Because of me. I don’t know how Missy is ever going to forgive me if that happens.”

“I’m so sorry,” David said. “I wish I could be there with you.”

“What’s going to happen if God doesn’t work this out the way we are praying He will?” Mark asked. “She’s never going to forgive me for not listening to her. It will be my fault if we lose our daughter. I just don’t know how we can make it past this.”

“I know you guys,” David said. “You will work this out...no matter what happens.”

“I don’t know. If we lose Favor, I don’t think she will ever trust me again. I’ll lose my marriage...”

David wanted to bring comfort and peace to his hurting friend, “Mark, I don’t have any answers. I wish I could promise you that God is going to answer your prayers exactly the way you want Him to, but I can’t. Here’s the thing I *can* promise you: God loves Favor more than you do. God has a bigger and better plan for Favor than you do, and if she gets left behind in Ethiopia, and you come home with your family, you will put your family back together and you will make it through this. God will find a way to be glorified in this, and He will save this child in spite of this horrible situation.”

Mark listened quietly, but his anguish spoke volumes.

“In the meantime,” David added, “I think some food and sleep would do your body good. This is not the time to worry about losing weight.”

Mark tried to laugh. “Nice,” he said sarcastically, “between the dogs barking all the time, and Islamic prayers going out over a loudspeaker at all hours, I’m not getting a whole lot of sleep.”

“Yeah, I’d have a hard time sleeping with that too. How are the rest of you doing?” David asked.

“It’s wearing on all of us,” Mark said.

“You’ve got an awful lot of people praying for you guys,” David said. “Why don’t you let me pray for you now.”

“Please,” Mark said as he bowed his head.

“God,” David started, “we thank You that You are with us. We thank You that You care about Favor more than Mark and Missy do, and that, however this turns out, You will receive glory for what is happening right now in this situation. I pray that You will strengthen Mark right now, that You will be his strength, and that You will be Missy’s strength as they walk together in this battle. May Your bonds of peace hold them together. I pray this marriage will come out stronger than ever because You will do a miracle work in their lives and in their marriage.”

David’s words were penetrating Mark’s heart and spirit. A weight was slowly lifting from his back.

“I’m reminded of the scripture that encourages us to stand,” David said. “After you’ve done all you can. After you have girded yourself, and armed yourself, and you’ve fought with your spiritual weapons, there comes that time when all you can do is stand. When your arms are weary, and you can’t swing the sword anymore. When you can think scripture, but your mouth is too tired to move, and you can’t even speak it out of your mouth. What you can do is, in faith, set your face like flint and say, ‘Here I stand!’ Jesus, more than anything else, we ask, please give them the strength and the courage to stand. Stand against the corruption that they are facing. Stand against the enemy that is seeking to steal, kill, and destroy. Protect them, Lord, by Your mighty hand. We ask all this in Your precious name. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.”

Mark dried the tears from his face. “Thank you!”

“Listen Brother,” David reiterated, “I want to encourage you to start eating. Eat *something*...go get one of those barking dogs if you have to.”

Mark tried to laugh.

“Kidding!” David said. “But seriously, you need your strength to be there for your family, and you not eating is not going to help you be the father and husband you need to be right now.”

Mark agreed.

“In spite of how you might feel...man, I know you probably feel crushed and crumbling on the inside, but on the outside, you’d better stand up. You have to demonstrate “safe” to your family. They need that, and you’re the one they’re looking too right now. If ever you’re going to be a decisive leader, it is now. Stand up, shake yourself off, and find your hope in the Lord.”

“Thanks,” Mark wearily said. “I love you, my friend.”

Mark and David ended their phone call. Mark’s spirit rose with new strength and hope that no matter the outcome, God was in control, and His love was enough.

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Meanwhile, I sent a message to our prayer warriors, unaware that the very words I was writing were the words I needed most:

This morning I woke up singing, “God I look to you.” I realize that so many of you are in the same place we are, trusting God to give you vision beyond what you can see in the flesh.

This morning God showed me a vision: He was standing before me with two paths. One was easier—it was getting out of Ethiopia last Thursday with Favor, undetected. We would be home safe with our family, and still have a testimony that would glorify God. We would’ve been stronger for going through it, but left on that path were children that would never be united with their forever families and be adopted.

The other path was hard and rough, one that we would’ve never chosen. It put us face-to-face with our enemy and into a battle that could bring great loss. There was darkness and snakes on this path, and we couldn’t see any end in sight. But, we knew God was there, and He would guide us through it. On this path, we had to lean on our Spirit and not our flesh, with just enough light for the next step. It would be the difference between being a foot soldier or being called out as a warrior.

There is something transforming in Mark and me—we are hearing a call to rise up in an area of life we never saw coming. There is an undeniable, righteous anger rising up to take back what the enemy has stolen and tried to destroy.

I know so many of you don’t like the path that our nation is on, but I encourage you to dig deep and rise up to what God is doing in America through you. At times, we all have been on that harder path, but we are not alone, God IS with us! We need more time on our knees to learn how to see with spirit eyes and hear with spirit ears. God is doing something BIG, and I don’t want to miss it because I’m too comfortable. Take any fear or anger and lay it at the Father’s feet, pick up your sword and shield with a righteous anger, and fight to bring America back to God.

The hard path builds muscle and burns out the dross. In times like these, pressing into the Father is the only way to survival. Look around you. What does Jesus want to do through you? While we’ve been here, we have had the opportunity to pray for those with HIV and leprosy. I don’t know if they’ll get well. I’m just believing they will. Maybe they just needed someone to touch them and show them love. Every time you pray for someone and hold them up in prayer, you are building your spiritual muscle and planting good seed.

Thank you, again, for doing that for us. We pray you will all be bountifully blessed for how you have stood in the gap for us! We Love you!

My stubbornness blinded me to my own words about anger. I decided to post the picture of Favor in the gym that I’d taken the night before. As I did, I took a second look. A golden cloud in the room made the blue floors green, and right above Favor’s head, there was a white form that appeared to be part of a large wing. Looking more closely, I could see several white shadows that appeared in the background. I didn’t see any of these things when I took the picture. Did my camera catch Heaven

coming down on us? I choose to believe it did, and grabbed onto another wondrous sign that God was with us.



Heaven coming down on beautiful picture of freedom—Favor running in The Academy gym.