

GOS PEL MOM

**EMILY A. JENSEN &
LAURA WIFLER**



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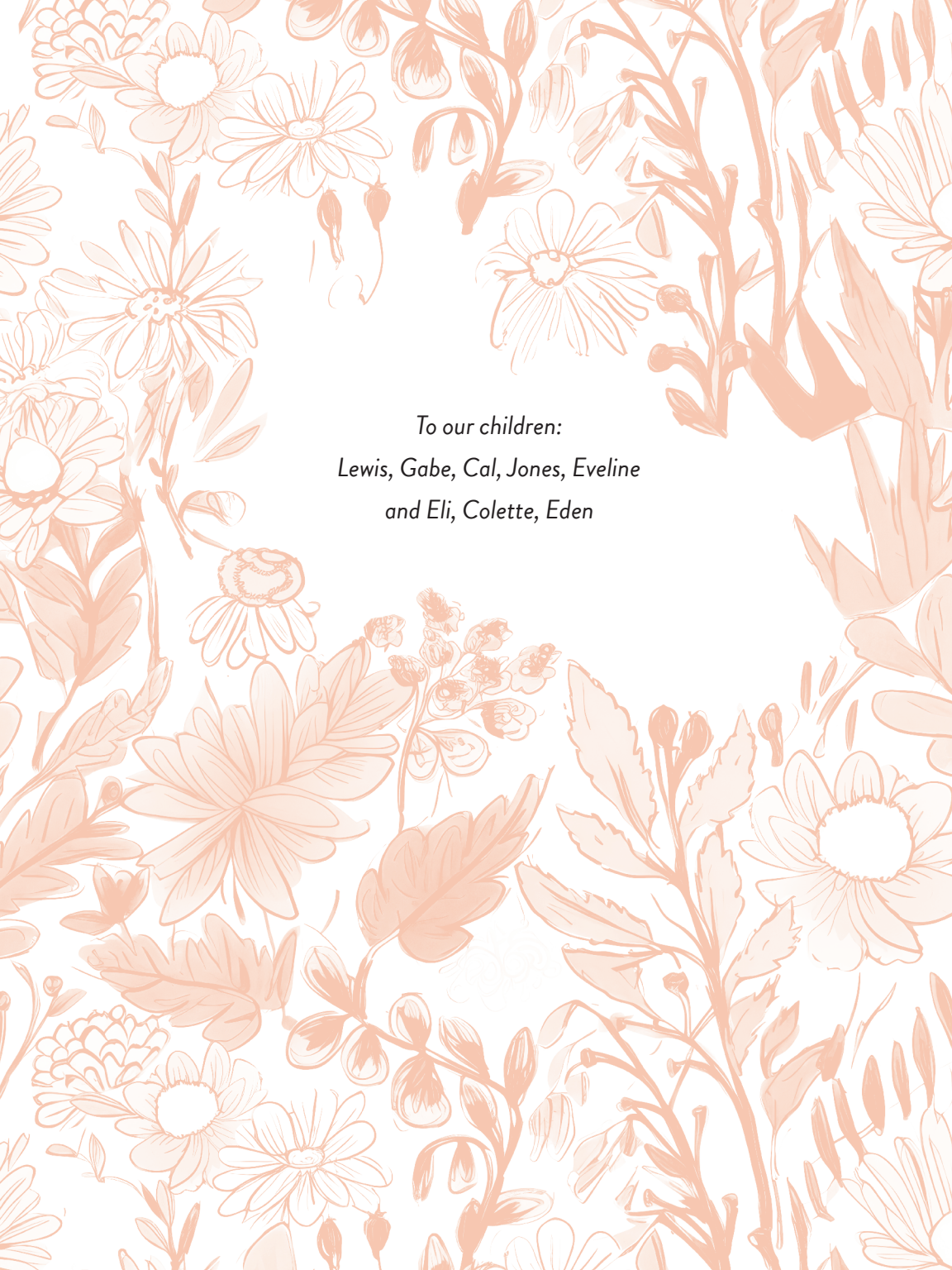
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*To our children:
Lewis, Gabe, Cal, Jones, Eveline
and Eli, Colette, Eden*



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There's a phrase in motherhood, taken from an ancient African proverb, that says, "It takes a village to raise a child." And it's true of writing books too. We've not only been shaped by teachers, theologians, pastors, and mentors over the years, but we've benefited from practical support from our husbands, parents, in-laws, friends, and colleagues. While most people flip past the acknowledgments, we hope you'll pause to read about the village that helped make this book possible—because we couldn't have done it alone.

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And last, but most importantly—we love you, Lord. We're simply your messengers, and we're not even the best or the brightest you could have sent. Thank you for letting us participate in your work. May you multiply the fruit of the gospel in and through this book.





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HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

When we were developing the concept for this book, we knew that it would include a lot of dense information and opportunities for personal reflection. Like any other skill we learn, there is an element of reading, watching, and listening but also an important step of trying it on your own. That's why, from the very beginning, we created a companion workbook, *Becoming a Gospel Mom*, to accompany this book. While the companion workbook isn't essential to understanding our framework for applying the gospel to motherhood, we do think it is immensely helpful, as you may see some of these concepts mapped out in different ways and have lots of application questions and space to process your own situation. Gospel motherhood is rooted in Christ, but the way it plays out is deeply personal. We hope you'll consider snagging the workbook to help you think through some of these things for yourself or with a group.



INTRODUCTION: WHAT KIND OF MOMS?

Mothers, it turns out, really do love a formula.

When our ministry, Risen Motherhood, first began to grow and require more time, the golden question was: How does work *work*? We each wondered: Exactly how many hours can I spend on this without compromising my motherhood? We were both moms of young children and primarily spent our days focused on the needs of our homes, but the Lord seemed to have additional plans for our days. We were deep in discussions about the gospel and motherhood, and we wanted to know what it looked like for a believing mom to be faithful while also pursuing other callings. Working at Risen Motherhood meant we needed occasional time away from our children for focused work and travel. We tried to make an equation by stringing together wise inputs of decision-making: *personal circumstances* plus *theological truth* plus *wise counsel* multiplied by *prayer* and divided by *practical implications*. As we thought through this, we each prayed and sought counsel from others who knew us well in real life, all to find the perfect number of hours a mom could work and still be a “good Christian mom.”

Spoiler alert: We never did find that number.

But it turned out the Lord didn't need us to follow the right formula to provide wisdom and guidance for our own lives. Over time, he brought both of us to places of peace and freedom in our motherhood, with our husbands, and in our work. He didn't give us the exact number of work hours, days, or trips he'd always intended for moms in Iowa to commit to a calling and still be considered faithful. Instead, he worked in our lives through his Word and his people, leading us in ways that were unique to us as we followed him in faith.

We didn't realize it at the time, but wanting standard, easy-to-understand answers and formulas is a common feeling in nearly every area of motherhood. And not just for us but for moms everywhere. Look at nearly any survey of mothers, and you'll find the majority of them struggle with guilt or feel overwhelmed. For just one example, in our annual Risen Motherhood survey, 93 percent of the nearly 10,000 moms who responded said they experience mom guilt.¹ We're guessing that some of that has to do with the fact that most of us moms aren't sure whether we're *doing* motherhood right. Moms love their kids, and moms want clarity about what it takes to parent with excellence. So we look for places and people who seem to have the instruction manual for parenting.

Imagine this scene with us: Eager parents-to-be sit sprawled on a nursery floor in the midst of parts and pieces, baskets, and empty boxes, hovering over a project as they anticipate the arrival of their first baby. Though arguments arise and assembly starts and stops, they help each other through the step-by-step instructions as they pass a manual back and forth. It all goes slower than expected, but eventually, together they step back to admire their handiwork. The crib looks just like the picture they saw online.

Maybe you didn't live this scene, or maybe it's similar to your own experience. Either way, you probably know the desire to prepare for motherhood and want everything to go just so. But while cribs and changing tables come with instructions, much of the work of raising children does not.

¹“The Results Are In! Our 2022 Survey of Christian Motherhood,” Risen Motherhood, March 24, 2022, <https://www.risenmotherhood.com/articles/the-results-are-in-our-2022-survey-of-christian-motherhood>.

While recipes, math problems, and new toys benefit from clear, predictable step-by-step instructions, mothering isn't as simple as input-output. In the absence of a handbook or formula that outlines exactly what we need to do the "right" things in parenting—down to the SKU number and sleep-training style—we stare into the abyss of 18-plus years with nothing but the advice of millions to comfort us. Without a clear process and the perfect next step, we're left to cobble together our own picture of what motherhood should look like.

Some people start with their own mother, updated and refreshed with the latest trends. *She did a pretty good job—maybe I can just be like her.* Some women cringe at the thought of becoming like their mother and instead reject her image completely, setting out to be the opposite. If neither of those options seems right, we might construct our picture out of pieces from our mother-in-law, our best friend who just became a mom two years ahead of us, or the young moms from our church. Or perhaps we find a few moms on social media and decide to buy from all their links and subscribe to all their methods. Every effort to figure out what to do as a mom feeds our larger questions: What kind of mom should I be? *And what makes me that kind of mom?*

At the core of these questions is the desire to be a good mom. By God's common grace, most moms are hard-wired with a deep longing to nurture, love, and protect their children—giving them all good things. We want to get it right because we feel the weight of our responsibility for the lives we hold. We love our children, and we comprehend the stakes of getting it wrong. These desires are also laced with other longings—the longing to know that we're enough. That we've done a good job. That our lives matter. We want other people to notice and give us credit for the good that we do and admire us for it. We hope that someday, maybe, as our child accepts some prestigious award, they'll look directly into the camera and say, "I dedicate this to my amazing mom, who made me who I am today. I wouldn't have any of this without her."

But that day isn't today. Snap back to reality, and we are the mother cradling her hand on the small of her back as she smooths the other hand over the life growing inside her. Or the mom with two under two, holding a child on each hip. Or the mom racing to get her three teenagers out the door in the morning. At each stage, we look out the window and wonder, *What does it take to be a good mom?*

Fill-in-the-Blank Mom

Over the last decade, the two of us (Emily and Laura) have embarked on our own journeys to understand what a good mom really is. If you read our first book, *Risen Motherhood: Gospel Hope for Everyday Moments*, then you might know that as sisters-in-law and friends, we talked regularly, discussing our everyday experiences as new moms. While we were asking each other questions about how we thought Scripture guided us in decisions about first foods, naptime routines, and working outside the home, we didn't yet realize that we were asking something even deeper. Eventually, those questions became a whole ministry dedicated to living "Risen Motherhood," and throughout the years, we explored hundreds of daily topics, seeking to apply overarching truths from God's Word to motherhood. Ten years into our own motherhood journeys, something started to crystallize for us—we were the moms who want to know not just *what to do* but *who to be*.

We've seen moms try to answer this question in a myriad of ways. And of course, we've done it ourselves too. It's like we all imagine a blank line before the word *mom*, and then we fill in that blank with anything we can until we find something that feels like a fit. The thought process, though often subconscious and complex, might cycle through subcultures and stereotypes: homesteading mom, urban mom, overseas-missionary mom, crunchy mom, gentle-parenting mom, homeschool mom, empowered mom, trendy mom, influencer mom, stay-at-home mom, career mom, chill mom, clean-living mom, I-do-what-I-want mom, you-can't-put-me-in-a-box mom, and so on.

Deep down, it seems like if we can just find the right word to fill in the

blank, it will shore up our wavering hearts and give us the assurance we need that we have measured up on the scoreboard. If we just get the right picture, we have a model. And for many of us, the model means there can be a handbook. And a handbook means we can finally have a formula for motherhood, erasing (or at least easing) the questions, fears, and ambiguities of our role. A tangible model for motherhood means we can be a little more sure that we're doing it "right" and have a measuring stick to check our progress.

But here's the catch—no matter how much we try to model ourselves after a certain type of mom (or maybe we're the mom who just waffles as she tries to find her type at all), we'll never be able to execute it perfectly. We'll find that we fall short and can't keep up in certain areas. Or that life hands us trials, sorrows, and circumstances neither we nor the manual were expecting. We might find that for a time, we can hold it all together according to our cultural model, but that often leads to us becoming smug and judgmental moms who are convinced we've found the one right way of being good while everyone else is falling short. Eventually, all of us find that we're still not totally happy with the mom we are, and we're left longing and questioning.

The good news, is our bent to fill in the space before *mom* is a good one. There is a word that can fill in the blank before *mom* and lead us into faithful parenting. And it's probably not the word you've been searching for.

Gospel Moms

If you've read *Risen Motherhood*, then you've heard us share a bit about God's purpose for moms:

God's design [for motherhood], both physically and spiritually, reflects the heart of the greatest Life Giver to the world. He is the ultimate creator of life, the ultimate nurturer and provider, and the compassionate gentle one who supplies our needs when—like our own babies—our only capacity is to cry for help... Until Christ returns, mothers have the mission of duplicating life and being fruitful through the Great Commission by the power of

the Holy Spirit. Our mothering should point our husbands, children, churches, and communities toward knowing and loving the same gospel we love.²

The purpose of our motherhood is ultimately rooted in God and his good design. It's not about us; it's about him. As women created in God's image, we exist to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."³ We do that first and foremost by acknowledging the "bad news" that we are sinners who fall short of the glory of God and have no ability to accomplish this purpose by ourselves. Then, by believing and confessing the gospel or "good news" that Jesus Christ came to save sinners through his life, death, and resurrection, we're made new.

This gospel story has undergirded our whole ministry at Risen Motherhood. Knowing Christ changes everything about who we are and how we live. It isn't just about one moment in history where Jesus hung on a Roman cross; it encapsulates a story that we are invited to be a part of, and it gives us the answers to our deepest longings and questions. As the gospel compels us to look to Christ, we learn who we really are, who we need, and who we should be. We start to understand our past and look forward to our future. We discover where we can get life, hope, help, joy, peace, rest, love, comfort, strength, and so much more. We find answers to our questions. Our identities are secured so that no matter what happens to us or how we stumble, we're safely bound to Christ, all the way through, until we reach home.

Much could be said about this—we've already written a whole book about it, and we're going to unpack it more in this one! But for now, here's what we want you to know: God does have a person he wants you to model your life after, and that person is his son, Jesus Christ. God doesn't give you

² Emily Jensen and Laura Wifler, *Risen Motherhood: Gospel Hope for Everyday Moments* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2019), 37, 38.

³ "Shorter Catechism of the Assembly of Divines: The 1647 Westminster Confession and Subordinate Documents," *A Puritan's Mind*, accessed November 29, 2022, <https://www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/shorter-catechism/>.

a formula or a precise point-by-point, product-by-product guide for every minute decision in motherhood, but he does give you his Word, with all the instructions you need to know to walk wisely through your motherhood journey. God doesn't leave you to figure all of it out on your own. He gives you his Spirit (and the church) to empower, help, and guide you along the way.

So you want to know what kind of mom to be? A Gospel Mom.⁴

We will explore this concept more throughout the book, but in case you need some convincing right up front, we hope you see that this kind of mom is full of joy and freedom.

A Gospel Mom...

Gains a new heart and a new nature with Christ's righteousness. You do good not to earn anything but because good has been done for you and you know you are capable of following and obeying God's commands.

Knows her mission and purpose. No matter your earthly accolades, you live a life sold out for Christ, displaying his goodness to the world around you and sharing the reason for the hope that you have.

Lives free from the punishment of sin yet still wrestles with its power. You won't be perfect, and you will struggle with this tension of a sin nature until you reach heaven's shores. You know God is in the business of redemption—nothing is too far gone or too bad for him to redeem.

⁴When people use the word *gospel*, they can mean different things. For the purpose of this book and how we're framing motherhood, we're using the word *gospel* to represent the metanarrative of God's redemption story through Christ for his people. The story of the good news of Jesus Christ is all-encompassing, and it also impacts all of life. The grand story of redemption is the one that informs all of our other roles and decisions. The mnemonic CFRC (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation) is the tool we use to help ourselves and other moms remember the high-level points of this narrative so we can more quickly consider how they apply. We were not the originators of this idea—it's been commonly used throughout church history in various traditions. We've learned from a wide variety of Christian authors and theologians over the years as we've developed our thinking about how CFRC interplays with our unique circumstances, personal conscience, and heart motivations.

Understands the realities of a broken earth and the hardship of life east of Eden. You know suffering and sorrow will be constant companions throughout your days on earth, and you don't expect life to always be easy.

Lives free from mom guilt. Because there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ and your sins are fully paid for, you don't have to suffer under the suffocating weight of mom guilt. If you're struggling, you can dig under the surface and uncover whether you're experiencing true conviction from the Holy Spirit or condemnation as you fail to meet your own or your culture's ideals.⁵

Rejoices because nothing can separate her from the love of God. When you fail, you can tell God, repent, and keep trusting him. He isn't mad at you or disappointed. He loves you more than you can ever imagine. You know God promises to help you, through the guidance of his Word and his Spirit and other people around you.

Recognizes the battle is against the world, the flesh, and the devil—not other moms. You know the battle isn't really about methods, ideas, or opinions on motherhood but instead against the spiritual forces of evil. You know who the true enemy is, and you stand your ground.

Walks in freedom from fear. While you know there are many things you could fear in this life, ultimately you only fear the Lord and believe that he is in control of all things. You rest secure that it's not up to you to control every variable or protect from all harm.

Trusts God to continue to grow and change her. You know you are sealed with the promise of the Holy Spirit, who is living and active inside of you, growing you day by day into the likeness of Christ.

⁵ See appendix C for more help unpacking mom guilt.

Sets her sight on eternity and the glory that awaits. You don't live for the immediate rewards of today in your marriage or kids, your bank account, or your circumstances. Your gaze is fixed on the person and work of Christ and what matters for eternity. You live with hope and a future.

Where We're Headed

In this book, we want to help you fill the blanks in your motherhood with the word *gospel* and live the type of motherhood we've laid out above by showing you how to navigate your everyday decisions and current circumstances with joy and freedom as you follow Christ. We believe this happens through a comprehensive understanding of the gospel in God's Word, the regular practice of spiritual disciplines and habits, and knowing how your circumstances, personal conscience, and heart motivations can help or hinder you as you bring glory to God. We want you to learn that a Gospel Mom isn't loyal to a modern lifestyle or method, subculture, or stereotype. She doesn't just blindly copy her mom or her friends at church or her favorite influencer. She's loyal to the King of kings and submits to his leading in all things.

To start this book, we will be giving you an overview and a short look at the life of a Gospel Mom, and then we'll spend the rest of the book explaining what we mean and digging deeper. We've created the companion workbook, *Becoming a Gospel Mom*, so you can follow along, make notes, and work through what gospel motherhood might look like in your own life.

If you are familiar with us and our Risen Motherhood ministry, then you are used to us showing you our approach to motherhood through our own application. That is what we did in the *Risen Motherhood* book and what we've done on hundreds of podcast episodes, but this book is a little different. One of our hopes in writing this book was to truly pull back the curtain and take time to explain our thought process as we approach motherhood in light of the gospel. You might think of this book as a gospel primer for moms or a

master class in applying truths of Scripture to motherhood and remembering the pillars and principles we've learned to consider along the way.

We want to make it clear that if you've believed in the good news of Jesus, you don't need any fancy Christian books on motherhood (yes, even this one) to glorify God, because you're fully righteous before the throne of God through Christ and have the Holy Spirit inside you. As a believer, you are already glorifying God as you look to him, live for him, and make decisions in faith. Just like the gospel itself is both beautifully simple and infinitely deep, living as a Gospel Mom is both simple (*just live by the Word of God and follow him in faith!*) and complex (*study, consider, apply wisdom, and spend time in prayer to seek God's leading, will, and praise in every moment of life*). We're sharing the concept of Gospel Moms with you not to give you another thing to have to achieve or worry about but as a helpful aide along the way. But with or without this book or way of thinking, we trust that if you're following Christ, this good news will keep doing its work in your heart and life.

The book is organized in three parts: the framework, the practices, and the thinking.

The Framework

In part 1, we'll walk you through the four parts of the gospel narrative—Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation (CFRC)—helping you grasp the meaning of those terms for yourself and understand why they matter in your daily life and decisions.

The Practices

In part 2, we'll lay out some common and important gospel practices and how they scaffold the life of a Gospel Mom. This includes things like spiritual disciplines, living in Christian community, and practicing regular rhythms of rest.

The Thinking

In part 3, we'll help you think through a lot of gray areas of motherhood as you seek to apply the gospel and follow God's leading in your life. We'll explain personal conscience and help you evaluate your own unique circumstances and motivations. We'll conclude with a look at the overarching goal of a Gospel Mom—to do all things to the glory of God and continue to grow in his likeness, knowing that we won't always get it right but we can rest in what faithfulness and success look like in God's economy no matter what.

We Are Gospel Moms

Let's go back to the scene from earlier in the chapter. The same parents who were once sprawled out on the nursery floor reading a manual to assemble a crib are gazing down at their precious new baby. The mother reaches in and scoops up her baby girl. The new mom is scared and unsure, but as she cradles her daughter gently, she whispers a prayer. You can't see what the mom is thinking behind her slight smile, but if you could read her thoughts, you'd know that she's at rest. God will give her grace for the challenges that lie ahead. God will give her help and guidance. God will be with her, and he loves her daughter more than she ever could.

Eventually, the crib is swapped out for a toddler bed, then a twin bed, then a bunk bed. The parents go in and out of the room over the years, assembling different furniture and redecorating as their daughter grows. Tossings and turnings, tears and toddler tantrums, tough conversations, and teenage woes rush through like movie scenes. When nearly two decades have passed, boxes and baskets again line the walls—she's leaving for college. When every item is packed away and the room is quiet once more, the mom examines the room, looks out the window, and knows that she has not done it perfectly, but she has walked with her God. He has sustained her. She's filled with anxious questions and a sad heart but also deep peace and rejoicing. Christ has been with her all the way, and he will be with her now and

to the end. It turns out she's not just a Gospel Mom; she's a gospel woman. She's fully his and has a purpose still to serve. The only one she will continue to follow is him.



We know we're only a bit into this motherhood journey, but we can already tell that we're going to need more than the hope of raising perfect kids and achieving our idea of a good mom. We're going to need the one who is fully and utterly good and can make us good too. We know that we need to be united with Christ and let his life and words define, guide, correct, and comfort us all the way.

What kind of moms are we going to be? Gospel Moms.



WHAT KIND
OF MOMS
ARE WE
GOING TO BE?

GOSPEL
MOMS.