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Before You Begin...

I'm guessing you picked up this Bible study because you're feeling off-balance. You're probably feeling overwhelmed and unproductive. Maybe you can't quite figure out how to squeeze important people and duties into your already over-committed life. Perhaps what you "should" be doing and what you're actually doing are two different things. You're most likely looking around at other women and wondering how the heck they do what they do—and look so good doing it! Meanwhile you're running yourself ragged just to put a decent meal on the table and catch up on the laundry.

You probably don't even think you have the time to do this Bible study.

I get it. That was me through most of my 20s and 30s.

I felt constantly harried, overly busy, disorganized, and unfocused. Juggling my career, my home, my marriage, my ministries, and eventually my babies, left me feeling drained and inadequate. I desperately wanted balance, but balance felt impossible—at least for me. I remember looking at other women at work, at Target, in their cars passing by me, and I assumed they all knew something I didn't. I was convinced I was the only one who couldn't figure it out. I thought everyone had it together, but me.

This was the 90s. I couldn't Google "how to achieve balance" for answers. For half that decade I had stirrup pants and a spiral perm, but no Internet. (These were desperate times.) Yet, I was determined to crack the code. If a tip, a system, a secret ingredient to life-balance existed, I would uncover it.

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So, I did what I always did when I wanted to figure something out in the 90s: I headed to Barnes and Noble and camped out in the self-help section. There I sat cross-legged on the floor with a giant, sugary, fat-free, caffeinated beverage, devouring book-after-book on time-management and home-organization.

Armed with my newfound information, I purchased a new day-planner (the obvious first step in time-management and home-organization prowess).

Then, I tweaked my laundry system.

And reorganized my closets.

And implemented a new diet and exercise regimen. (A small part of me has always believed I can fix everything by eating more green vegetables.)

And called my friends and ~~asked for advice~~ complained.

And vowed to be a better human.

And prayed—a lot.

But nothing worked—not even the prayer. Time with God was just one more thing I struggled to fit into my already-packed schedule.

There's no way anyone can actually do this balance thing. I may as well just succumb to my overwhelming, unfocused life. I give up.

After several desperate attempts and failures at achieving life-balance, I concluded balance was a myth, a unicorn—pretty and intriguing, but fake.

Then, in what I thought to be an unrelated act, I picked up a short Bible study written by Cynthia Heald called, *Becoming a Woman of*

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Freedom. At the time, I had no idea that the balance I was seeking was actually what the Bible calls “freedom.” Freedom and balance are interchangeable terms. (The word “balance” also appears in the Bible, but only as it relates to scales or money. A Bible study about honest scales and bank accounts will not help you feel less frazzled, trust me.)

Heald’s study helped me identify weights I carried—weights that, turned out, directly affected my on-going struggle with balance. Then it led me to Scriptures that specifically addressed those weights. As I applied these Biblical truths to my life, I began to feel lighter, freer. This gave me hope that maybe balance was possible, after all.

That year, I sat at my kitchen table with a toddler running around my legs and a baby in the bouncy seat next to me. I worked through that Bible study two more times. I highlighted and underlined and dog-eared the heck out of that little book. I was so inspired that I invited a group of young moms from my neighborhood into my messy house to study it with me. Later, I taught that same Bible study to a group of women at my church. Several of those women wanted to go through the study a second time, so I invited them into my home, and we went through it again.

In the process of teaching these truths to other women, I absorbed them deeply into my heart. Every time I taught it, God led me to more Scripture and more insight into the subject of freedom and life-balance—which, in turn, gave me more hope. I kept adding my new discoveries and personal illustrations to the Bible study material. Eventually, I had so much additional material, I realized I wasn’t even teaching the Cynthia Heald study any longer. It grew into an entirely new study.

Not only that, but I also realized I was living the well-balanced life I had been striving for all those years.

Feeling like I may be on to something big, I wrote a 20-part blog series called, “Balancing God and Life.” This series resonated so well with readers, that it became the basis for a new class I taught at my church

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called, “Balance That Works for Women.” (Not the best title. It sounded like I was teaching on hormone health.) After creating the curriculum for that class, I realized I had enough material and life-experience to write on the subject of balance indefinitely. So, I ditched my old blog theme and launched an entirely new blog called, “The Scoop on Balance,” while also teaching the ever-growing material, yet again, to a group of women in my neighborhood clubhouse. (This is starting to read like my resume—sorry.)

In the winter of 2016, a small group of moms from my daughter’s school gathered in my home on Thursday mornings to study (you guessed it) balance...*again*. And that group of precious women said, “*You need to publish this.*”

What you’re about to read is the product of more than twenty years of learning, studying, writing, and teaching balance to women all over the world. Today, I invite you to be part of that ever-growing group of women who seek to live a life of balance.

I’ve never been more convinced than I am today: **Balance is a real thing.** It’s neither a myth nor a unicorn. It’s a worthy pursuit: tangible and entirely possible. I’ve seen it. I know real women who live well-balanced lives. I, Sandy Cooper, live a well-balanced life. And, at the risk of sounding like a late-night infomercial, I believe, in the very depths of my being, you can live a well-balanced life, too.

But wait, there’s more!

Before you dive in, let me first tell you what balance is NOT:

- Balance is not doing everything.
- Balance is not doing everything your friends are doing.
- Balance is not doing everything your friends think *you* should be doing.

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- Balance is not doing everything you see on Pinterest, Instagram, Facebook, or whatever social media venue is hip when you are reading this.
- Balance is not doing everything well.
- Balance is not doing everything by yourself, without help.
- Balance is not doing a little of everything each day.
- Balance is not spreading yourself equally among every person, task, responsibility, and expectation.
- Balance is not the absence of stress.

If you're pursuing any of the above things and calling it "balance," then let me break this to you gently: Balance, by any of those definitions, does not exist. Please do not pursue it. It's a recipe for failure and frustration.

Over the next 11 lessons, we're going to explore what real balance is and how we achieve it. In Part I, I will help you reconsider your current view of balance and reveal to you a workable definition based on Scripture and common sense. Then, together we will discover what God says about our time, our pursuits, and our attention.

In Part II, I will identify the barriers to balance—Perfectionism, The Comparison Trap, People Pleasing, and Busyness—and together we will learn practical steps to overcome them.

By the end of this study, you will feel more focused and less frazzled. You will have a clear understanding of Biblical balance and how to live it, today and forever. You will have hope that balance is not only real, but entirely possible. If you apply what you learn here, you *will* live a well-balanced life—I promise.



About this study:

If you are familiar with popular women's Bible studies, you may be used to seeing each lesson broken down into "weeks" and "days." I

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chose not to do that. I just call them “lessons.” I want you to work at your own pace, whether it takes you a day, a week, or a month. Please spend as much time as you need on each lesson. Don’t use your progression (or lack thereof) as another measuring stick against which you fall short. You can’t “fall behind” in this study.

I’m working from the *New International Version* of the Bible for fill-in-the-blanks. Whenever I reference another version, I will give you that Scripture.

Within each lesson, we dig deeply into scripture, but then I offer practical ways I apply the scriptural concepts to my life. We are all different, so my personal examples may not work for you. They are simply a catalyst for you to think of ways to apply these concepts to your life. Therefore, periodically, I invite you to consider your unique situation and make the lesson personal to you. Don’t skip this part.

At the end of each lesson, I offer a Scripture-based prayer, using the Scriptures we studied in that lesson. Praying God’s word is one of the best ways to get the Word into your heart. It also solidifies the lesson and helps you pray God’s will over your life by declaring the Scriptures as truth over your circumstances. Of course, you can (and should!) pray to God as you wish. This is simply a launching pad and a template to get you started as you learn to pray God’s word.

I’m so excited you’re here. I know you are ready to get started, and so am I. So, let’s do this.

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LESSON SIX

The Comparison Trap

“Comparison is the thief of joy.”

Theodore Roosevelt

A few years ago, in the dead of a rainy, dreary, cold Kentucky winter, I went searching online for a women’s conference to attend. My youngest daughter was still a toddler, which meant most days I was house-bound. My big daily outing was driving my older kids to school. Each day felt like an eternity as winter dragged on. I needed to get out of the house—and not just to the grocery store. I craved a night away in a hotel, in the presence of other (adult) women, minus kids and carpools.

I needed something to nourish and refresh my soul.

So, I clicked around until I found an event that looked like a good fit. It was close enough for me to travel by car, yet far enough that I needed to book a hotel. It was a blogging conference that promised relevant teaching and Christ-centered worship led by women.

It did not involve children.

It did not involve carpools.

It looked perfect.

Then I began reading the speaker bios.

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It may have been the cabin fever talking, but every description of the women leading this conference looked like this to me:

Susie Smith is a homeschooling mother of six. She and her husband live on a farm, where she creates nightly meals from scratch with the organic vegetables she has grown and harvested with her bare hands. Her passions include, home interior design, green living, frugal living, women's ministry, and nurturing sick and orphaned animals back to health. She is the author of seven books and the wildly popular blog, I Have It All Together, Why Don't You?

(Insert professional headshot of beautiful, flawless woman, on a farm)

Jenny Jones has lived in seven countries and dreams of living in five more. She is a homeschooling mother of four; ages nine, eight, seven, and six. She and her husband are expecting quadruplets in the fall. She is a marathon runner and plans to complete her 5th marathon just before delivering the quads. She has led over 50,000 people to Christ, through her personal discipleship and mentoring program. In her spare time, she enjoys creating gourmet recipes for her best-selling cookbooks and has appeared on The Food Network, The Today Show, Oprah, and Ellen.

(Insert professional headshot of beautiful, flawless, buff woman—who looks neither pregnant nor tired.)

Ugh.

I'm exaggerating about the content of the bios, but not about the inadequacy I felt as I read them. It appeared that each woman speaking at this conference was simply unbelievable. I wish I could say I acted like a grown-up and celebrated each woman's accomplishments as I considered how I might glean something of worth from her, but that would be a lie. Instead, I was jealous. With every bio, I compared that woman's accomplishments to my own and mine fell painfully short:

Sandy Cooper is a stressed-out mom of three. She knows she could never home school because she can barely handle the stress of doing math homework with her 4th grader,

during which she enjoys sampling “calming teas.” In her spare time, she folds laundry. Every morning, she wakes up wondering how she’s going to get it all done, and most days, she doesn’t. She loves to write, but mostly uses her gift to craft daily to-do lists. She’s not sure if her kids actually brush their teeth, and last week, she packed a sandwich in her daughter’s lunch with the wrapper still on the cheese. Her roots are growing in. She dreams of changing the world, but neglects changing dead light bulbs, dirty bed sheets, and the kitty litter.

(Insert un-touched photo of me in yoga pants, ponytail, and no make-up)

After my brutal exercise in self-deprecation, I simply didn’t measure up. The more I read and compared, the more defeated and deflated I became. Eventually, I clicked off the website, turned off my computer, and shuffled my pathetic, underachieving-self into bed. I never booked the conference. So much for “nourish and refresh my soul.”

If one thing universally messes with our balance as women, it’s comparison to other women. The older I get, and the more other women my age accomplish in life, the more brutal the comparison trap becomes for me. Sometimes I feel like everyone is dashing past me, doing all the things I envision for myself—things I thought I would have already accomplished by now. Yet, here I am, limping breathlessly behind, buried under a pile of laundry or stuck in a carpool line.

Maybe you aren’t comparing yourself to writer/speaker/moms, like I am, but you are comparing yourself to...

The neighbor with the beautifully decorated, always immaculate home.

The couple in your church with the thriving, healthy marriage.

That family on your Facebook feed with the polite, intelligent, and spiritually mature children
The entrepreneur generating a 6-figure income in her jammies.

The retired woman in your book club who is traveling through Europe.

To us, they appear perfect, or near-perfect. We see them. We envy them. We wonder what we are doing wrong. And then, we erect a ridiculously high standard with which we feel compelled to judge ourselves.

Ladies, this is a terribly dangerous place to linger.

I have never met a woman who does not struggle with comparison on some level. What about you? Does this barrier pose a problem for you and your balance? Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10.

Comparison is not a problem for me ----- *Comparison paralyzes me*

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Who are the people you compare yourself to most often? Name them here. We will refer to these names later. (You can use code words if you think someone may see this—that's what I do):

The History of The Comparison Trap

The Comparison Trap has been around since the beginning of time, literally. Read the Bible passages referenced below and answer the questions that follow.

1. Cain and Abel Genesis 4:1-8

Why was Cain jealous of Abel (vv. 3-5)?

Write verse 7 word-for-word.

According to verse 7, how did God give Cain a chance to make it right?

What did Cain do instead? (vs. 8)

Notice that Cain was jealous of Abel because Abel chose to obey God and God granted Abel with favor. Do you ever feel jealous of other women because they are doing the God-honoring thing and you are not?

Comparison leads to jealousy and jealousy is sin. I love the way God refuses to dance around this issue with Cain. He basically says, “*What is your problem, Cain? Why are you so angry with your brother? If you do what I ask you to do, I will accept your sacrifice, too!*” Then, God directly warns, “*But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, **but you must rule over it.***”

Comparison is a slippery slope. For Cain, what started as feelings of anger and sadness (vs. 6) quickly escalated to murder! This is why we must gain control over it at the very first hint.

Okay, so my jealousy has never resulted in murder—I’m hoping yours has not either. Still, it’s alarming how closely the two are related in this example. *How else might you harm someone when you become jealous of them?*

What are some practical ways you can “rule over” or control the temptation to compare yourself to other women before you harm them?

2. Saul and David *1 Samuel 16:14-23, 1 Samuel 18:5-12*

How is David described at the time he met Saul? What kind of young man was he? (1 Sam 16:18)

How did Saul feel about David when he first met him? (1 Sam 16:21-22)

When and why did Saul begin to feel jealous of David? (1 Sam 18:6-8)

How did Saul's jealousy quickly spiral out of control? (1 Sam 18:10-11)

How long did it take between the time Saul became jealous and the time he tried to kill David? (Again, with the murder!) (1 Sam 18:10)

Write 1 Samuel 18:12 word-for-word.

Name the two emotional ways Samuel's jealousy manifested. (1 Sam 18:8 and 1 Samuel 18:12)

When David first came under service to Saul, he met Saul's need. This greatly pleased Saul. David was loyal to his post and loyal to the Lord. His dedication and success opened the doors to more opportunities. Everyone loved David. Every place David served, he excelled, and the people noticed. This is precisely where things took a wrong turn in Saul's attitude.

Do you know a person (maybe a co-worker or family member) who is loyal, dedicated, and well-liked by others? How do you feel about this person when others sing her praises in front of you—or to you?

What about people who seem to do the wrong things (maybe they are dishonest or lack integrity), yet they appear to be winning at life? How do you feel when these people excel past you?

Negative feelings indicate a deeper heart issue. Take a moment to examine your heart. If you feel anger or sadness when others are spoken well of, what could be the deeper issue? (There is no wrong answer here.)

Jews and Paul and Barnabas *Acts 13:42-45*

What were Paul and Barnabas doing at the synagogue? (vv. 42-44)

Why did the Jews become jealous? (vv. 44-45)

What did the Jews do as a result of their jealousy? (vs. 45)

Notice the pattern in these Biblical examples:

Person A obeys God.

Person B disobeys God.

Person A wins the favor of God and/or men because of his obedience.

Person B becomes jealous of Person A.

Person B attempts to harm Person A.

Look back at the names (or code names) of the people you mostly compare yourself with. Do any of them fit the profile of Person A—the one who obeys God?

Do you fit the profile of Person B—the one who is jealous of Person A?

The Comparison Trap Today

Even as recently as 150 years ago, our knowledge of others existed because of our day-to-day interactions with them. We farmed together, shopped together, and raised our kids together in community. (And by “we,” I mean “other people.” I was not alive when “we” were farming together.) Without cars, airplanes, television, or computers, we had almost no knowledge of those outside our immediate social circle. Because the communities were small, our neighbors were also our kids’ classmates, our church family, and our extended family. We saw everything about everyone, good and bad.

I imagine life was a bit more authentic than it is today. After all, how can you possibly hide behind a façade when the same people surround you day-in-and-day-out? Your dirty laundry hangs out for all to see—*literally*.

Today, our knowledge of others is quite the opposite. **Instead of knowing a few people intimately, we “know” thousands of people superficially.** Oddly, we know as much about Beyoncé as we do about that mom at our kids’ school (who could, quite possibly, be Beyoncé, depending on where your kid goes to school). Our knowledge of everyone comes through a series of virtual snapshots—hundreds and hundreds by the minute: a news quip on our homepage, a Facebook status, a Tweet, an Instagram photo a Snapchat. How close to reality can this possibly be?

The answer: *not very*.

Today we feed ourselves a steady diet of trivial information on other people, yet lack depth with most of them. Never in the history of humans is it easier for us to see what everyone else is up to (or what they appear to be up to), and then to compare ourselves to it.

As if that isn’t bad enough, our minds play a trick on us. We see one woman

doing crafts with her toddler, another on a ski vacation with her husband, another selling skin care products on her side hustle, and another doing yoga while diffusing essential oils. We take all the separate images of individual women, and we merge them into one perfect woman. We believe everyone else is doing All The Things, and we judge ourselves against this imaginary standard.

Our hyper-connected society sets us up to crash into this barrier all day...

TO CONTINUE READING, PURCHASE
FINDING YOUR BALANCE
IN ITS ENTIRETY

