

**A Conversation with Jennie Allen,  
Author of *Nothing to Prove: Why We Can Stop Trying So Hard***

***Q. I want to talk about the book, of course, but first, let's discuss IF: Gathering. What is it? How did it begin?***

**A.** In 2007, I began to sense that God was pushing me to do something different. In many ways, this is the most empowered generation of women in the history of the world, and we're still learning how to use that power.

I want to equip women to go out into their communities across the globe, lead, and make a difference. IF: Gathering was born out of that desire. It's about giving women the support and tools they need to live out God's unique calling for each of their lives. After working for years to build a platform and formulate what this kind of movement might look like, in 2013, we enlisted the help of 60 women leaders from a broad cross-section of denominations and backgrounds. We decided, among other things, that the IF: Gathering would have no set ticket price, and that while many of us would come together in Austin, we'd also live stream the event so that local groups could watch and join around the world.

The next year, we had the very first IF: Gathering. The Austin event sold out in 47 minutes. In the first two years of the conference, we reached more than one million women in more than 50 countries. It's mind blowing.

***The success of IF has been immediate and intense: it's one of the fastest growing conferences in the world. Why do you think it's grown so quickly?***

**A.** I think it just struck an incredible need in women. We deeply desire to be connected to each other and to a purpose that's bigger than ourselves.

God also gave me a global vision for this conference, and the timing was just right. Between its global scope and the power of the internet, it just blew up. It's hard to explain how in more than 120 countries around the world, plus every major city in the United States, we have women tuning in and being a part of this. And this isn't just a stream that someone is watching alone in their pajamas. IF: Gathering is based in Austin,

but there are leaders around the world who gather their people locally around the event, and they walk through it all in person together.

All over the world at the same moment, women are listening to the same things, praying the same things, engaging in the same conversations. Yet, it's local. They're with neighbors, friends, college classmates, co-workers—it's built around their people.

They don't have to go anywhere, and yet, they're part of a bigger mission and a bigger story.

***Q. That is something unique: IF is global but you strongly emphasize local connection.***

**A.** Yes. We believe that change happens eye to eye. We believe in meals together, and in being together.

We've lost some of that today in our culture. We have lost the art of connecting face-to-face with real conversations and community, just being in each other's lives day in and day out. Instead, we're finding community online and through screens, even texting friends instead of getting together.

It feels like we've become more isolated even though we're more connected to more people than we've ever been. We have to fight this.

***Q. In addition to the local emphasis, this is a conference created by and for women. Why women?***

**A.** Well, that's what I understand and who I am, you know?

The power of women in a room together is different than that of a mixed audience. When women are together, we tend to be more vulnerable and open up. I also think we dream bigger dreams together.

We are coming out of a long period where women did not use their voices the way we do now. I think we—to some degree—are still learning how to take the opportunities that we have in this generation.

It helps to be with kindred people who want to do the same things: we want to spend our lives well. What that looks like may be different for everyone in the room, but we all want to spend our lives well. We all want to make a difference.

When I meet women, no matter where they live, I've noticed a surge in both the compassion and strength I encounter. Those two powerful forces are changing the world right now. Women are using their voices to meet need in their communities, in their own families, and to support strangers across the globe.

***Q. And IF:Gathering 2017 is right around the corner?***

**A.** Yes it is—February 3 and 4 we'll gather again around the world. We have a live gathering with concurrent events happening all over, and then, we'll also have a way for people to watch later as a digital download. Some local events will be happening post-February.

It's an amazing thing.

***Q. Okay, now onto Nothing to Prove. Congratulations on writing your third book! Has writing gotten any easier?***

**A.** Well, I never have a shortage of things to say! (laughs) But no, writing has not gotten easier. I don't think any writer anywhere would say writing is easy.

It's always hard, I think, to birth a passion that is in your mind and heart into words. It's such a labor, birthed out of deep conviction that you have something to say. A book is a powerful way to hold someone's hand and walk them through a deeper process of untangling feelings, insecurities, and fears they're living with. You can't do that in a blog post. In a book, you can walk with people for an entire season.

I've lived out the journey I explore in *Nothing to Prove*, and for me, it took years and years. This book is largely the story of my process and a guide to helping people begin and push through their own.

A book is powerful because you can use it to take people somewhere.

***Q. And where are you trying to take readers? Where does the journey lead?***

**A.** In *Nothing to Prove*, the goal is liberation: a place of freedom and appreciation for the joy of living that does not strive to be enough, measure up, or perform.

It's a completely different way to live. That takes time to realize.

***Q. You are saying something profoundly different in this book. Just the title itself is countercultural: Nothing to Prove. We're conditioned to prove ourselves—it's all we do.***

**A.** Exactly! It is *all we do*. It's funny: when I tell people about the book, most say, "Oh my gosh. I need this book!" But every once and a while, someone will say, "Yeah. I know somebody who needs this." And I think, really? But not you? (laughs)

We are all so programmed to prove ourselves. I see it in myself still. Even though I've worked through this and have gained a deep understanding of the freedom I have, I still feel this urge rear up in me. I mean, I just wrote a book called *Nothing to Prove*, and I still feel like I have something to prove!

I have to step back and remind myself that I don't have to strive. It doesn't have to be so hard. I get to enjoy my life rather than try to make something happen or control the outcome. I get to allow God to be and take care of those things for me.

***Q. This is not the message of most self-help books today, is it?***

**A.** It's a wholly different message! Most self-help gurus are saying, "You are enough. You're awesome. You're fantastic!"

Well, yes. I agree that God gave us value and made each of us uniquely gifted. But look: we do tend to mess things up, don't we? We make mistakes. Even those who are leading massive amounts of people or successful companies would probably say, "At the end of the day, I still feel like a little bit of a fraud. I don't deserve to be here."

I think that feeling is meant to point us to God. He wants to do great things through us and for us. I do not believe those great things come from our own worth. I believe they come through God's power, strength, vision, and love for us.

We do not need to tap dance for Him or anyone else for that matter. He wants to work through us. This life is meant to be an adventure, not a performance.

***Q. You just used a key word I want to talk about: strive. In Nothing to Prove, you urge us not to strive. That's another 180-degree difference from what most of society says. Why is striving a bad thing?***

**A.** I think we're all completely exhausted from it. It'd be one thing if each of us had just one goal we were striving for, like good parenting. We all agree good parenting is worthy of our effort.

But the Bible says, "Be still, and know that I am God." Consider how those two concepts fit together. When we are striving, we aren't still. Ultimately, we are trying to control outcomes and what the world thinks of us. And that's playing God.

Now, not striving does not mean that we don't use our gifts. If anything, we will use our talents with more joy and freedom if we aren't feeling like everything is being held together by us. Instead of trying to measure up or become something important, we can contribute to a bigger effort God is already doing here.

It's just a whole different framework for living, and I believe we were built for it.

***Q. And your reasons for believing we are meant for this different framework are rooted in your faith?***

**A.** Yes. You can look throughout Scripture and see that when people were living in the first framework—the striving framework—it never worked for them. Think about Adam and Eve, striving to be like God and obtain all understanding.

The Tower of Babel is a perfect example. The people tried to build a tower to get to God. It's funny: Scripture actually says they did it "to make a name for themselves." Is that not our generation's primary focus? To make names for ourselves? We're all about that!

Choosing the second framework is about exploring and understanding our motivation—trying to make sure it's coming from the right place. But the second framework also allows us to truly enjoy life.

God made us to live for him. When we're doing that, we're the fullest, most joyful, freest, peaceful versions of ourselves.

***Q. In addition to referencing spiritual texts, you draw from your own experience in this book. You are very open. Why did you decide to share such personal details, especially your eating disorder and attention deficit disorder?***

**A.** I've never been this open before—never shared anything about my struggles with an eating disorder and ADD, specifically. I'd never wanted to share anything about those two things before.

It was a huge decision. A friend really pushed me to include such personal battles. As I considered, I thought about how we all hate the weakest parts of ourselves. I do so much work to overcome my challenges with attention deficit and work so hard not to fall back into the eating disorder I struggled with years ago. So going back to those places was super vulnerable.

But I realized something. These are the stories God's given me where I've seen Him. These insecurities are the very things that have brought me to complete dependence on God. It'd be easy to be a leader who always projects the idea that I know what I'm doing: "Follow me, look at my strengths, I'll teach you how." But if I did that, I'd be robbing everyone of the actual places I've needed God the most, places of weakness, insecurity, and fear, where I've tested the limits of God's grace and seen that He is enough for me. I don't necessarily want to go first—to share first. But I choose to go first so that other women can hopefully share their weaknesses.

There is a persistent lie that says the people that God uses are the people who have it all together. Well that's not true at all. When you look throughout Scripture, you find it was weak, broken people who saw their need for God that God actually used.

I've got to expose that. If I actually believe God is enough for me, no matter what my weaknesses are, then I have to show the weaknesses. It's about living what I preach to be true, which is that I can have weaknesses and struggles and still lead.

***Q. In the same vein, people will really connect with the idea of “numbing out” as a coping mechanism that you present in the book. You write, “I don’t want to be with Jesus. I want to be with Netflix,” and it is so funny, honest, and relatable. At any point, did you think, “Man, some people may not get the joke. Maybe I won’t include this...”?***

**A.** I was laughing as I was writing that, but I was also kind of crying (laughs). Like, what’s wrong with me?

When I started this book project, it was called *Numb*. It was all about the numbing—whether it’s shopping, Netflix, our kids, our jobs, whatever the numbing agent. But as I wrote, I never could get to what the problem was. I could only describe the problem. I knew it was happening. I knew I wanted Netflix more than Jesus, but I couldn’t diagnose why, couldn’t seem to help people journey out of it. And that has to be the point of the book—to help people.

Three weeks before the book was due, I realized the real source of the problem. I was numbing out because I was living as though I had something to prove. I had to reframe and rewrite the whole book!

Because the problem itself is not numbing. Numbing is just a symptom. We numb our bodies with ice when there’s an injury because we don’t want to feel the pain. I had to realize, “What is that pain for me?”

***Q. What did you find?***

**A.** I started digging, and it was like, “Oh no! This is my lifelong struggle!”

The book became so much bigger. It addressed a life message for me. This isn’t about just a few years of struggle: I can look back to childhood and see this—the striving, then the numbing to cope with the striving and trying to prove myself to a fault.

Well eventually, you just wear out. You never can make everybody happy—bosses, children, parents, friends, spouses, colleagues, even complete strangers! We try to please and prove ourselves to people we don’t even know. As soon as you accomplish what you thought would satisfy you, the line moves, and all of a sudden, you feel like you need to do more.

That cyclical journey is what caused me to not want God, because really, I was striving for Him too. Ultimately, I started striving more for God than people. And think about it: what kind of relationship is it if you feel like you have to perform and measure up in the other’s eyes?

***Q. So you realized that you didn't want to spend time with God because He'd become the ultimate version of everyone else to you—the disapproving boss you were constantly trying so hard to please?***

**A.** Yes! I realized that while I trusted Jesus for salvation, I had not trusted him for my day-to-day life. I knew the theology, but I didn't believe it and got into bad patterns. I did not enjoy his freedom and works of grace on a daily basis. I had to shift the way I was relating to God, and that process is what Nothing to Prove is all about.

Now, on the other side of that process, I crave being with Him more. It doesn't feel like I'm on stage, and He's the director demanding I do things. Today, it's that we're on a journey together, and when things get too heavy, I can hand them to him—in fact, he was already carrying them. I just needed to let go.

***Q. These are patterns everyone gets into. Our lives are cluttered with them. In the book, you push us to see the divine and beauty in that clutter and mundane. But for those of us—most of us!—who are so bogged down in it, where do we start?***

**A.** That's a great question. When you're stuck in the patterns of striving, it feels like you're on a treadmill, right? Well, the first thing you do is just stop. You're running. Stop running. On treadmills, there is a big, red emergency button—push it. Just stop.

I know that idea is going to make everyone really nervous. We're so afraid everything is going to fall apart. Well the truth is, most everything we're doing will stay together if we take a break to walk away and analyze our lives.

Part of our pride is believing that we can't rest. The world needs us so much! Our worlds are held together by us. But here's the thing: Even with my kids, I've noticed how capable they are when I'm gone. But when I come home, they need everything done for them again (laughs).

***Q. So what do you do when you stop? What questions should we ask ourselves?***

**A.** Admit you need the pause in your life. You need to get away, so make it happen. Then, in that time, ask yourself questions like how am I really doing? What do I need? How do I feel right now?

During this pause, you also need to fast from social media and technology. Part of the treadmill is glancing over at everyone else running all the time. We do that through social media. We're comparing ourselves constantly, and it makes us feel like we're always behind, always losing.

Once you slow down to reflect and stop looking at everyone else, you can spend some real time with Jesus. Don't be afraid. Commit to building a different life for yourself—a life that reflects what you believe to be true of God.

There is a big body of Christ working. All of the needs in the world don't have to be met by you. You get to be a part of it. And you're most fulfilled when you're bringing that part and not thinking that it's up to you to hold everything together.

***Q. Every chapter in Nothing to Prove is strong, but I especially love Chapter 5. There are two key points here I'd like to discuss. I love the way you address marriage and family—especially when it comes to your own daughter. You point out that marriage and family have become idols. It feels like no one else is talking about this.***

**A.** Well, for one, I'm surrounded by singles every day. Most of our staff at IF:Gathering is single, all different ages. I'm watching these women bring so much honor and glory to God in this season of singleness, however long it is, and I'm so moved by the way they live their lives.

We value coupledness, but singleness brings certain privileges. We've tended to prioritize married people in the church, and we assume all singles will marry. Well, times are changing. We are going to see more and more people who choose not to get married.

The Scriptures are very clear: Paul says it is better that you not marry. We have got to shift our thinking on what it means to be single in the church. It is a huge place of honor, and we need to recognize that.

Another point: these are things that are largely out of people's control. Most of the women in my office would say, "Yes, I'd love to be married." But at the same time—even if they're dating—it's not guaranteed that they'll meet the man they would marry.

If we put our identity in something we cannot control, we're setting ourselves up to be unhappy, discontented, and unfulfilled. I certainly want my daughter to realize that God has great plans for her, whatever they are, to be married or single, have kids or not.

I'd be terrified if she left the house and thought that her identity was tied to something she couldn't control. That's a recipe for disaster. Because let's think about what we also know to be true: let's say she does get married. That's not the end of the story. A lot of the time, you realize quickly that the person you thought was going to complete you doesn't. And you're disappointed.

We have to build a new framework for what it means to be an obedient, vibrant follower of Christ that is less about our circumstances and more about our heart, and our walk and our relationship with Him.

***Q. You say something else in Chapter 5 that is so important: You say you worry that we now believe it's wrong to be happy. Can you elaborate? How'd we get here?***



**A.** People feel guilty if things are going well. I've felt it too. Part of that is living in the Internet age and understanding that suffering is happening both around the world and locally. We are so much more aware of what needs exist.

So how do we enjoy the good things God has given us? Because he has given us so much that is great. He is terribly creative. He made wine for a wedding and spent meals talking and discussing important ideas. His life here with us was full of intentional, beautiful moments. It wasn't all about suffering.

I think we can start to become martyrs for God, for each other, for our kids, our jobs, all that God's given us. Then, we find that we've forgotten what it is to be full of wonder, excitement, peace, and joy—emotions God built us to experience.

So how do we get back to a place where we can experience guiltless joy?

So much of what I do in my books is to just help people diagnose what they've been feeling, recognize that those feelings are a product of perhaps not believing God in certain areas, and then to begin to flesh out practically what trusting God in those areas would look like. What would it feel like, day in, day out, to really live that way?

***Q. In addition to reading *Nothing to Prove*, how else can women explore this disconnect between what we believe and how we're living?***

**A.** I think that is where we need each other. We need community and people around us reminding us.

I fell back into a dark season not long ago. I was depressed. I shouldn't have been: there were so many blessings all around me. There certainly were some hard things, and a lot of pressure, but it didn't match the emotions I was feeling.

I needed my friends to just grab me and say, "Here's what's true of you. Here's what's true of God. Here's what's true of His purposes for you." It was so life-giving, like a wind back into my chest whereas before, I couldn't catch a breath. I was full of fear and anxiety, and then they spoke this truth over me, and I remembered, "Yes. My hope is secure. My God is good. I'm seen. I'm loved."

We all need that. We desperately need each other to speak truth into our lives so we can live what we believe.

***Q. If readers just have one main takeaway from *Nothing to Prove*, what do you hope it is?***

**A.** I want them to enjoy their lives and God again. I believe that starts by getting off the treadmill of working so hard to impress God and everyone else. Stop striving, and start living.

### **About Jennie Allen**

Jennie Allen is a staunch believer in the power of just one life beautifully lived – and she is determined to pass her belief on to women everywhere. With her own purpose to disciple a generation as inspiration, the in-demand speaker, author, and teacher officially launched IF:Gathering, an innovative forum for women, in 2014. The event has since become one of the fastest growing conferences and movements in the world, empowering participants across continents and denominations to live honestly and deeply. With stark candor, humor, and vulnerability, Jennie connects women to purpose by sharing her own struggles through her blog, acclaimed books, talks, and more. In January of 2017, she will publish her highly anticipated third book NOTHING TO PROVE: WHY WE CAN STOP TRYING SO HARD. Jennie lives with her husband Zac and their four children in Austin, Texas. For more information, please visit [www.JennieAllen.com](http://www.JennieAllen.com).