

with others—especially their husbands and children. This book is exceedingly practical and gospel-centered in its application.

—**Karen Hodge**, Coordinator of Women’s Ministries, Presbyterian Church in America; Coauthor, *Transformed: Life-taker to Life-giver* and *Life-giving Leadership*

Sara Wallace identifies the source of a young mom’s many anxieties, then gently points to the Creator who cares for *her*. Filled with humor, counsel, and gospel insight, *Created to Care* provides nuggets of sanity to strengthen the weary and calm the worried. Highly recommended!

—**Rondi Lauterbach**, Author, *Hungry: Learning to Feed Your Soul with Christ*

When there’s so much for us to fear—including our own shortcomings—*Created to Care* reaches out toward us fellow mom-travelers in kindness, pointing us over and over again to the all-sufficiency of the One who gently leads us.

—**Holly Mackle**, Editor, *Same Here, Sisterfriend: Mostly True Tales of Misadventures in Motherhood*

From day one of motherhood I have vacillated regularly between sinful control and crippling fear. I have long struggled to trust the Lord without feeling like I’m failing my children. In her book *Created to Care*, Sara Wallace not only shares these common mom struggles but also points us to the cure: entrusting both our mothering and our children to God’s sovereign care. Rather than telling us to do more or be better, Sara teaches us how to move from sin and fear in motherhood to trust and confidence in Christ. I can’t think of a mom who doesn’t need this book.

—**Glenna Marshall**, Author, *The Promise Is His Presence: Why God Is Always Enough*

Created to

CARE

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CARE

God's Truth for
Anxious Moms



SARA WALLACE

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You can also check out www.prpbooks.com/book/created-to-care for an anxiety diagnostic quiz for moms.



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Introduction

Wired for Worry

All I've ever wanted to do was be a mom. When I was little, I asked for a baby doll for every single birthday and Christmas. Every time I got a new doll, I would push it around in a stroller, feed it, change its clothes, and put it to bed. I even asked Jesus to please not come back before I got the chance to be a real mom.

But those baby dolls were a bit deceiving. They didn't wake me up in the middle of the night. They didn't leave me with postpartum depression. They didn't have huge diaper blowouts in the middle of church or make my hair fall out or give me mastitis. They never got sick or hurt. When I became a real mom, I found that real babies are a million times sweeter—and a million times more challenging.

How could motherhood be so wonderful and so hard at the same time, I wondered? It felt wrong to admit how hard it was. I felt like I was complaining or taking this beautiful gift for granted. I loved being a mom. I loved it so much it hurt. It gave me more joy than I could have imagined—but it also exposed the depths of my weaknesses and opened a whole new world of anxiety. I had the precious gift I had waited for all my life—and now I felt that I had to do everything I could to protect it.

Motherhood does strange things to us. Maybe you've heard the news stories that go around from time to time about moms who suddenly gain superhuman strength in order to protect their kids—stories about lifting up a three-thousand-pound car or jumping over an eight-foot wall. Science describes this phenomenon as a combination of adrenaline and pain-suppressing chemicals from the brain. We more commonly refer to it as the “Mama Bear” instinct.

God is the creator of the “Mama Bear” instinct. He uniquely fitted moms to be able to protect children. Unfortunately, it is hard to turn our “Mama Bear” instincts off. We think of thousands of ways our kids could get hurt and then try to prepare ourselves for every possible scenario. In the wee hours of the night when everyone else is asleep, we lie awake worrying about whether our kids had too much sugar, whether they're making enough friends, or whether there are any spiders in their beds.

On top of what could happen to our kids, we are also keenly aware of our own shortcomings. We envision the kind of dream childhood we want our kids to have, and then we see all the ways we might manage to mess it up. We are not the moms we think they deserve.

Do you see? Anxiety and motherhood are linked for a reason. God created us to care. But he created us to care within the context of *his* perfect wisdom and *his* perfect strength—not our own. He chose weak and broken vessels to accomplish this task so that he will get all the glory.

Author C. S. Lewis offers us a unique perspective on anxiety. He writes, “Some people feel guilty about their anxieties and regard them as a defect of faith. I don't agree at all. They are afflictions, not sins. Like all afflictions, they are, if we can so take them, our share in the Passion of Christ.”¹

Do you see the challenges of motherhood as a chance to

draw closer to God and to actually share in the sufferings of Christ? Anxiety is a sin when we give it a permanent residence in our hearts and allow it to rule our thoughts. But when we refuse to accept anxiety and instead engage in warfare against it, we bring great glory to God.

Are you ready to do battle with anxiety? You can find great strength and comfort for this battle—but only in the cross. My hope and my prayer is that this book will show you the way to that comfort—that even in this unpredictable season, you can know that God is for you. And I pray that in your darkest moments of uncertainty, you will catch a glimpse of glory that will take your breath away.

Part 1

Committing Your
Motherhood to God



1

Peace for Mom Guilt

Last week I came into the living room and found my four-year-old lying perfectly still, flat on his face. I was startled.

“Honey, what are you doing?” I asked.

The muffled voice from the carpet said, “Playing with my toys.”

I stared at him, confused. I didn’t see any toys, and he certainly didn’t look like he was playing. “What toys?”

My son shifted his body slightly so I could see under his stomach. I saw two plastic snakes, three playing cards, and a Lego man peeking out. His current favorite toys.

“Why are you lying on them?” I asked.

He turned his head to face me. “I don’t want anything to happen to them.”

I tried to process the situation. “You’re protecting your toys so you can play with them . . . but you’re not playing with them. Are you having fun?”

“Yes,” came the automatic response. Obviously, he was not.

I didn’t understand. My son loved these toys, but he couldn’t enjoy them. He couldn’t bear the idea that something might happen to them (or that a brother might dare to touch them).

He would rather lie facedown on the carpet than play with them.

I had to laugh at the ridiculousness of it. He looked so miserable. Something that was supposed to bring him joy was paralyzing him.

I have an embarrassing confession to make: that's exactly the way I sometimes feel about motherhood. I love being a mom so much, and yet it terrifies me at the same time. I suffocate my own joy by holding on too tightly. It's as ironic as my four-year-old lying on top of his favorite toys.

Does anxiety keep you from enjoying this beautiful gift of motherhood? Perhaps you have prayed, waited, and prepared to be a mom, and now you're paralyzed by the thought that something bad could happen. Or maybe motherhood caught you by surprise, and you don't feel equipped for this unexpected blessing.

We know our sin and our weakness better than anyone else. And yet God chose to entrust us with the precious gift of children. As we bask in the glorious mercy of this thought, a nagging fear creeps in: *Can I handle this? What if I mess it up?*

Before you became a mom, perhaps the consequences of your actions didn't seem so big. They usually only affected you. But now everything you do affects your kids. *Everything*—whether it's good or bad. How do you know if you're doing the right thing at any given moment? How can you protect your kids from your own weakness, incompetence, and flat-out sin?

Accepting Our Imperfection

Recently I got a sweet message from another mom. She loves her children dearly and is constantly haunted by the idea that she will mess things up for them. "I know that God can forgive me," she wrote. "But I also know that sin has consequences.

I'm afraid of what consequences my children will have to live with because I'm a sinful person."

I can relate. I know how it feels to see the hurt in my son's eyes when I speak harshly. I know what it's like to ruin everyone's fun on a family outing because I let my own stress take over. There are nights when I fall into bed with an aching heart, wishing my kids had a perfect mommy.

But they don't. And, as much as we strive to put our sin to death, there is nothing we can do to change the facts: we are sinners, and we will remain sinners until the day we are with Jesus. We will fail our children. They will live with the consequences of our sin. And you know what? *They* will be sinful parents, too. Their kids will suffer the consequences of *their* actions.

Does that sound depressing? Maybe. But, in a way, it is also freeing. Whenever I went shopping with my mom as a kid, we would listen to Elisabeth Elliot cassette tapes in the car. One of Elisabeth's favorite quotes was "In acceptance lies peace." Peace doesn't necessarily come when our circumstances change; it comes when we accept our circumstances the way they are. Does that mean we accept our sin? Yes—we accept the *fact* that we are sinners and remember that Jesus came only to save sinners (see Mark 2:17). There is peace when we stop fighting against the fact that we are sinners and say instead, "I am the one Jesus died for. Yes, I am a sinner; but I am forgiven."

Once we accept our problem, we are free to accept the solution. We know that our kids will grow up in a sinful world with sinful parents and that they will need the same solution that we do.

Accepting Christ's Perfection

When I was fourteen, a woman from my church gave a message to all the girls in the youth group. I sat in the front row and

watched as she held up first a dirty old bathrobe and then her handmade wedding dress. Each handsewn bead sparkled. The girls were spellbound as she explained how Jesus removes our filthy rags and makes us his spotless bride. It was like taking off the old bathrobe and putting on a costly wedding gown. That was the first time I had ever heard the term “imputed righteousness.” I knew that Jesus took my sin, but I didn’t fully grasp what I got in its place: his perfect righteousness.

What does this mean for Christian mommies? It means that when God looks at us he sees his Son. Even on the bad days? On *all* the days. So often, I feel like a mess—physically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. I feel like the sentence “It’s been one of those days” is stamped on my forehead. But God sees something else. He sees a heart that is washed white as snow—a beautiful bride waiting for him to return.

Several years after that youth group talk, I came across the verse that gives the same illustration: “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD . . . for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (Isa. 61:10).

These “garments of salvation” aren’t something we have to put on every day. We are already wearing them. We didn’t clothe ourselves; we *have been* clothed by God.

God’s Part, Our Part

How do these righteous robes affect our daily motherhood? God sees his Son in me—but how does that silence the mom guilt? When we see ourselves clothed in Christ’s righteousness, we have fresh confidence to do what God has called us to do. We

know that he is working through us for his glory and that he will forgive us when we fail.

Connecting our theology to our daily lives doesn't always come naturally. As busy moms, we often experience a disconnect between the spiritual and the physical. Our salvation is "out there"—but the screaming baby is right in front of us. It's hard for us to meditate on eternity with Jesus when we can't see past the diapers and dishes.

We know God takes care of the "big stuff," but it's our own failure that scares us the most. We think, *Whatever God is in control of I can trust him with. But if it's in my control, I know I'll mess it up.* I want to encourage you: there is no separation between God's part and our part. It's *all* God's part. He is in control of every part of our motherhood—including us.

Yesterday I was running errands with the kids, and I turned on a sermon by one of my all-time favorite preachers: my dad. I just about slammed on the brakes when he said, "Our sins do not hinder [God's] good, eternal, sovereign purposes for you; they are part of it."¹ Amen! What kind of God can use even our sin to bring about good? What kind of grace is that? It's a grace that we don't understand. But we revel in it—and we say, "Thank you, God." I am responsible for my actions—good and bad. And God has a perfect plan for my actions—good and bad. We don't have to understand it in order to accept it—and to take great comfort from it.

I was getting my two-year-old dressed last week and marveling at his big blue eyes and his tuft of blond fluff. I thanked God for giving him to me. But I rarely (or maybe never) thank God for giving *me* to my son. Just as God picked my son for me, he picked me for my son. God chose to use me in this calling for his glory. He is working through me. When my personal insecurity nags at my heart, I can remind myself, *I have been chosen*

by God for this task. He will not leave me alone. I am forgiven. I am new. God made me a mom for his own glory.

I first heard the word *deism* in a philosophy class in college. Deism teaches that God set the world in motion and then stepped back to let it run its course without him. Not only is this a depressing thought, it is also unbiblical. Our Creator is intimately acquainted with all our ways (see Ps. 139:3). He is the one who started the good work in us, and he has promised to complete it (see Phil. 1:6). He is walking with us every step of the way.

So often we live our lives as if God has said, “I saved you—now, you live out your life here the best you can and I’ll see you on the other side.” Paul calls this foolishness: “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal. 3:3). God did not leave us on our own to finish what he started.

If we apply this idea to our own motherhood, it’s like telling our kids, “I gave birth to you—now, you go do your thing and I’ll do mine. Maybe I’ll see you around some day.” Don’t we long to hold our kids’ hands and see them through every twist and turn of their journey through childhood? That is how God deals with us, as well.

We need to mend this harmful disconnect—the idea that God handles the big stuff and we handle the rest. There is no better remedy for this than Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” God gives us everything we need for this life. The proof? He already gave us his son.

Do you believe that God is working through you? Or do you feel like he is too far away or you are too broken? You are not just filling marching orders each day, hoping that you’ll mess up a little less than the day before. You are an ambassador

for Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:20). God is showing your children the gospel *through* you—and your brokenness is part of it. Let’s explore how.

Not-So-Perfect Moms Share the Gospel

My kids are constantly “camping” in the house. They gather up all the lanterns and flashlights and run to the darkest place they can find (usually my closet). They head for the dark because they want their lanterns to shine brighter. In the same way, God uses our weaknesses to make his glory shine brighter. In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul says, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves” (NASB). God gets all the glory.

I can talk to my kids about God’s forgiveness all day long. But showing them his forgiveness is different. When I repent in front of my kids, I take their hands and lead them to the cross. I show them the well-worn path I have walked many times. I point out my footprints for them to put their own feet in. I say, “This is where we go. This is the only path to forgiveness.” I show them that glorious place where, in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian’s burden rolled off his back and he exclaimed, “Ah, what a place is this! . . . Blessed cross! Blessed tomb! Nay, blessed is the Lord that was put to shame for me!”² One day, when my children recognize their sin, they will know where to go. They will remember.

Can you see how our sin is part of God’s plan? God is glorified through the journey, not just at the destination. Our sin, suffering, and pain are all part of the journey. All of it points to the gospel—including our broken motherhood.

When we mess up, in both big and small ways, we can come alongside our kids and say, “We are all in this together. We are all sinners in need of a Savior.” We seek our kids’ forgiveness

and God's forgiveness. We aren't perfect, and they won't be perfect either. We have to show them how to deal with their imperfections.

Maybe you think that your sin is too big for God to handle—that he can accomplish something good only with perfect people. Paul tells us the exact opposite: “And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (2 Cor. 12:9 NASB).

Wait. Are we supposed to actually be *happy* about our weaknesses? Look at Paul's mixed reaction when he was smacked in the face by his sin: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:24–25) This same thankfulness that Paul displayed renews our own confidence for the task ahead. We have been delivered. And now we have a job to do.

Unrealistic Expectations

Speaking of jobs, have you seen the meme floating around on social media that describes a mom's job? It usually says something like “Don't tell me I don't have a job. I'm a doctor, nutritionist, chauffeur, chef, teacher, maid, accountant, counselor, project manager, and personal trainer.”

The only problem is that we are *not* all of those things. We are simply women who love our babies. *None* of us could fill that kind of a job description.

When I was in school I was terrible at science. It never clicked for me. I scraped by with a passing grade, but I have accepted the fact that I will never speak periodic table. When I became a mom, suddenly I felt like I was expected to be a scientist. I was supposed to know the thousands of ingredients that were

in each thing my child could possibly eat, how the ingredients would interact with each other, which nutritional elements my child should have at what age and in what quantities, when to choose homeopathic remedies and when to use modern medicine. I was a wreck.

But my expectations were crazy. Unrealistic expectations create a vicious cycle of anxiety. The only way to break the cycle is to apply God's truth directly to our expectations. What do we expect from ourselves as moms, and what does God expect from us? Let's compare job descriptions.

Our Expectations	God's Expectations
Feed my child perfect food. Never let my child get hurt. Give my child a perfect home environment. Never sin in front of my child. Give my child perfect friends. Answer all my child's questions accurately and patiently. Make every vacation scrapbook-worthy. Make every party Pinterest-worthy.	Train up a child in the way he should go (Prov. 22:6). Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt. 6:33). Work heartily, as for the Lord (Col. 3:23). Be faithful in the little things (see Matt. 25:21).

What differences do you notice? We get tripped up by the details, but God shows us the big picture—the end goal. To “train up a child in the way he should go” means to show our kids the gospel. Point the way to Christ over and over. We

complicate things by placing expectations on ourselves that distract us from the purpose of motherhood. When we take a step back and refocus on the big picture, the details that cause us anxiety fade into the background. Suddenly we see our kids' hearts. We're reminded of what's important.

You can see how God's expectations allow for many different personality types among moms. You don't have to be good at everything. You don't have to know everything. You can point your kids to Christ whether you're a working mom or a stay-at-home mom, whether you're a college grad or a high-school dropout, whether you were raised in a Christian home or became a Christian later in life. When you start to feel the panic of not knowing how to do everything "right" for your kids, remind yourself of your simple goal: Seek first God's kingdom. Look for ways to show your kids the gospel.

This should bring so much relief to us moms. Show my kids the gospel? Yes, I can do that. Imperfectly, of course—but as we've already seen, our imperfections are part of the gospel story. We are imperfect mommies raising imperfect kids in an imperfect world. There are so many things we *don't* know, but we can cling to what we *do* know: Jesus died for sinners. Can I give my child a perfect diet? No. Can I teach him about Jesus? Yes. Big sigh of relief.

Take one more look at the expectations chart. We could fail every single one of our own expectations on the left and still fulfill God's expectations. Yep—even when we sin. And some family vacations stink. Some birthday parties are a hot mess. It doesn't mean we are failing as moms. Everything we experience with our kids, good and bad, can be part of "training them up" in the gospel.

Past, Present, and Future Comfort

A good friend in college confided in me that she was nervous about having kids one day. “I don’t know what a good mom looks like,” she said. She didn’t come from a Christian home, and she herself didn’t become a Christian until she was an adult. She already felt guilty for letting her kids down, and she didn’t even have kids yet.

The hope for a mom from a non-Christian home is the same as for a mom from a Christian home: We are forgiven in Christ. We are a “new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). We have all been saved from the same dead state by the same perfect righteousness.

The disciple Peter had a messed-up track record. He denied Christ, gave in to peer pressure, and set his heart on earthly things. But he belonged to Christ. Before Peter’s greatest betrayal, Christ gave him a special charge that must have echoed in his heart for the rest of his life: “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32).

Christ knows that we, like Peter, will fail. But he also knows that our faith will go on. It will experience the painful flames of refining, but, in the end, it will come forth as gold. And as failed, redeemed mamas, we are called to turn and strengthen one another. Know that every mom, no matter her past, is afraid of failing her kids. When your past threatens to steal your joy, find another mom to encourage. Tell her, “We are in this together. We were dead, and now we’re alive—and our kids are going to know it.” This is where we see the beauty of the body of Christ. Dive into your local church. Seek out moms whom you trust and admire. You are not alone.

Do you believe that God made you a mom on purpose? Do

you believe that he put your kids in your home for a reason? If you do, then you must believe that he already knew what he was working with: a flawed mommy. Not only did he know, but he has worked your sin into the equation from the beginning. God has no Plan B. He didn't say, "Well, I need a perfect mom for this job, but you'll have to do." He chose you for your kids and your kids for you—all for his glory.

Satan does not want us to be confident. He wants us to constantly wallow in our weaknesses and insecurities so we won't show our kids the glory of Christ. I love Martin Luther's response to this: "When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: 'I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? . . . For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is, there I shall be also.'"³

We can accept all our inadequacies with confidence, because we've been forgiven. Our strength comes from Christ, not from ourselves. Give your insecurities to Christ. Fix your eyes on Christ in whatever he calls you to do today, and let your kids' eyes follow your gaze.

What Other Moms Are Saying

In our weakest moments of motherhood, we long to hear a voice say, "Me too!" There is comfort in knowing that we are not alone—that other moms understand the unique struggles of this season. I've been blessed to be surrounded by wise, godly mamas at every stage of my motherhood journey. At the end of each chapter, in this "What Other Moms Are Saying" section, we will have the privilege of hearing from many of these women. Some of these women I have known since grade school, when we would daydream about what it would be like to be

moms and what we wanted to name our kids. Others I've met in church, at college, or through my blog. Each one has poured into my motherhood in a special way. I love the variety of perspectives they offer. I hope you will, too. Let's listen in to how other moms from all walks of life find peace in the chaos.

I am most overwhelmed when my focus is on myself. I am most equipped to be the mom I want to be when my focus is on Christ. (Rebecca)

When my husband started med school and I was on my own with the kids, another mom encouraged me to start praying more. At first I rolled my eyes—but I felt convicted about it, so I took her advice. WOW! I instantly saw a difference in my personal insecurities. I can now tell when my prayer life is lacking by how strong my personal insecurities are. (Carrie)

I think what would've helped me in my first years was for someone to just remind me that Christ is the perfect parent on my behalf and that no matter how I mess up, he alone can save my kids. (Katie)

When insecurity starts to take over, I blast worship music. My kids love it, and it helps me refocus. It's hard to grumble while singing praise. (Melissa)

I try to remember that God saw fit to make me my kids' mother and that now my kids are my mission field because God has *sent* me to them. (Jori)

When I lean on my own skills and knowledge, I stumble. That's when I remember to acknowledge *him* in all my ways (see Prov. 3:6). (Christy)

It really helps me to just have honest conversations with the Lord in which I admit all the ways I'm struggling. Something like, "Lord, I am really struggling with not getting frustrated when my daughter whines. Please give me wisdom in my parenting and honor my sincere efforts to raise her in your love and truth." (Rebecca)

When I had my twins, I was completely overwhelmed by personal insecurity. That's when I fell in love with Psalm 56:9: "This I know, that God is for me." If a believer truly believes that, they can face anything. (Andrea)

Reflection

1. What are some unrealistic expectations you place on yourself that lead to insecurity?
2. What do you think Paul meant when he said, in 2 Corinthians 12:10, "When I am weak, then I am strong"? For more context, read verses 9-11 as well.
3. Look at the first part of Isaiah 50:9: "Behold, the Lord GOD helps me; who will declare me guilty?" How could this verse bring you comfort when you feel the "mom guilt" creeping in?
4. Look again at Luke 22:32: "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Can you think of a time in your life when you were able to use your failure as an opportunity to point someone else to Christ?
5. Do you know a mom who struggles with insecurity in motherhood? How could you encourage her today?

Glenna is an excellent writer who carefully traces the theme of God dwelling with his people, from Genesis to Revelation. As she weaves in her personal stories of pain and loss in memoir fashion, we journey with her on a discovery of new and more meaningful ways that God is always near and good and faithful and kind and enough. Overall, I was convicted in the sweetest way to remember that abiding in the Lord's presence through his Word is enough for me in the midst of my every fear, unmet desire, struggle, and joy.

—**Kristie Anyabwile**, Editor, *His Testimonies, My Heritage*

Glenna Marshall has done it. In her book, *The Promise Is His Presence*, she has managed to pull off a balance that is rare among Christian authors: a book that clearly and accurately portrays the story of redemption reflected throughout the Bible while also connecting it with the author's very gripping, heartbreaking, and inspiring personal story of suffering. With her beautiful writing style, she reminds us that the answer to joy in suffering is not the alleviation of suffering but the reality of God's presence in it. I commend this book to all those who are seeking the secret to experiencing the nearness of God in the darkest of places.

—**Brian Croft**, Senior Pastor, Auburndale Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky; Founder, Practical Shepherding

If you are weary, discouraged, or suffering, you will find refreshment, encouragement, and comfort in these pages. Glenna Marshall masterfully combines biblical truth and relatable personal narrative to explore the doctrine of God's presence with his people. The result is a stunning display of the hope, joy, and peace that we have because of God's presence with us.

—**Marissa Henley**, Author, *Loving Your Friend through Cancer: Moving beyond "I'm Sorry" to Meaningful Support*

I resonate deeply with the title and message of this book. The promise of God's presence has sustained me through the darkest days of my life and has given me hope for the future. This is Glenna's story, too, and she writes of the pain we all face—not with pithy clichés but rather with deep, experiential knowledge. She gives voice to our humanity while consistently pointing us to the goodness of God. I am thankful.

—**Christine Hoover**, Author, *Searching for Spring: How God Makes All Things Beautiful in Time and Messy Beautiful Friendship: Finding and Nurturing Deep and Lasting Relationships*

In *The Promise Is His Presence*, Glenna Marshall repeatedly speaks a beautiful truth—that in our painful struggle, though we may never find out the *why* behind our sorrows or see *how* we will make it through them, because of Immanuel we know *who* dwells with us in our suffering. Marshall reminds us again and again that the most important thing for us to remember is *who*—in our wanderings, God has given us himself, and that is the greatest promise he could ever keep.

—**Abby Ross Hutto**, Author, *God for Us: Discovering the Heart of the Father through the Life of the Son*

In this book that is achingly beautiful and brimming with gospel truth, Glenna Marshall follows the thread of God's goodness and faithfulness throughout the entirety of Scripture while also seamlessly weaving in her own path of pain and suffering. This is a charge to God's people to remember that the point of our trials isn't how quickly we can barrel through them but, rather, who we can come to know and love more deeply along the way. I found a fellow sojourner and was reminded of a faithful shepherd in *The Promise Is His Presence*.

—**Gillian Marchenko**, Author, *Still Life: A Memoir of Living Fully with Depression*

A truly refreshing read that has forever changed my perspective on suffering. Where is God when we suffer? Glenna Marshall's personal journey of suffering reminds us that the problem is not that God is not present but that we look for evidence of his presence in the wrong places. Whether you are walking through the valley of broken dreams or stuck in a rut of spiritual dryness, Marshall shows us just how God's presence can answer every longing of our hearts.

—**Sara Wallace**, Author, *For the Love of Discipline: When the Gospel Meets Tantrums and Time-Outs* and *Created to Care: God's Truth for Anxious Moms*

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the promise is
His Presence

WHY GOD IS ALWAYS ENOUGH

glenna marshall



P U B L I S H I N G

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To William,
my companion on this tangle of dark and beautiful roads.
The grip of your faithful hand brightens every
shared sorrow and multiplies every joy.

*But as for me, God's presence is my good.
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
so I can tell about all You do.*

—PSALM 73:28

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Introduction

Like a Recurring Dream

Having the reality of God's presence is not dependent on our being in a particular circumstance or place, but is only dependent on our determination to keep the Lord before us continually.

—OSWALD CHAMBERS

I have a recurring dream that I'm eight years old, gap-toothed, and wandering my childhood church. My ponytail bounces as I run up and down stairs, searching for something. *Something*. I'm not sure what. I pass classrooms lit with fluorescent bulbs and flashes of memory. Down the darkened stairway connecting the choir loft with the basement, which still smells of old hymnals and polyester robes, I look in all the right places and even in the ones that I suspect will turn up nothing.

I've never found it—nor do I even know what *it* is. Whenever I have that dream, I'm forever stuck in a loop of roaming but never landing on what it is that I'm looking for—I'm only certain that I'll know when I've found it.

The presence of God feels like that, doesn't it? We're not sure exactly how to describe or locate it, but we're certain we'll know when we experience it. It seems like an elusive dream that we try to manufacture in our church services with low lighting,

soft music, and persuasive sermons that pull at emotional heart-strings. The modern-day American church strives to create an atmosphere that convinces us that God is with us.

But what if I told you that no stage-setting is necessary? That the presence of God is not something we can reproduce or manipulate with the right guitar chord or turn of phrase but rather something we can enjoy at all times? God has promised us the gift of His presence, all throughout Scripture. And it's a promise that He continues to keep today. We don't have to go looking for it, we don't have to attempt to manufacture it and package it for redistribution, and we don't have to wonder if we'll ever find it. Those of us who have believed in Christ Jesus for the atonement of our sins already have everything we're looking for.

Awakening to God's Presence

It wasn't until I was in my early thirties that I realized that God's presence was the answer to all my heart's longings and desires. God used a decade of suffering in order to pull back the veil and show me how my trials—which included infertility, chronic illness, and profound church hurt—were avenues for me to understand the importance and magnitude of His nearness.

It happened slowly, like the long-awaited greening of the trees after a brutal winter. The branches are empty and dark against a bleak, gray sky, but one day there's the barest of green—a whisper, really—on the trees. The sky warms, and then one morning you're driving down the street and it hits you that the world has turned flowery and brushed with green again. When did it happen? Incrementally—but you didn't see the process. You only remember the before, maybe the middle, and the after.

My awakening to God's presence began during a bleak winter, both physically and spiritually. I was convinced that God didn't much like me. I knew Scripture was my only place to go for help;

I'd tried everything else. I didn't know exactly what I was looking for—hope, maybe. Or something that I knew I wouldn't find: a promise that the Lord would change my circumstances. But I'd exhausted every other resource. So I kept reading, searching for the secret answer to my troubles but feeling that the search was time poorly spent.

One day, I opened a new journal and penned an entry. The next morning, I reread it and realized I had merely cataloged all the ways that God had abandoned me . . . just as I had in every journal entry for the previous six months. Something had to change. I kept looking for *me* in my Bible, but all I found were words that I couldn't connect to my life.

In desperation, I switched tactics. I bought a stack of spiral notebooks. I began in the book of Isaiah and scribbled down every phrase about God, every character trait, every random thought about His personhood that struck me as I read. A few months later, a hint of green appeared on the trees outside, and I realized that the Bible was bursting with one truth that I needed more than anything else: God was with me.

The Wonder Years

I had a nine-month jump on church attendance before I was even born. Both of my parents were raised in church, and their first-generation believer parents passed down a heritage of faith that I am privileged to call my own. I was taught the gospel from infancy, and it wasn't hard for my young heart to believe I was a sinner in need of a Savior.

At the age of six, I completed my first Bible drill (that Scripture-memorization competition that was well known in conservative churches during the late 1980s). Not only could I recite all the books of the Bible, I also knew many of the bricks in the "Roman road." I understood that I could either pay for my

sins in hell or believe that Jesus paid for them at the cross. Even at a tender age, I could see that I had to do something with Jesus. He couldn't just hang on the felt cross on the flannel board of my elementary Sunday school class. I had to decide whether He was what I wanted my life to be about. Grasping as much as a six-year-old can, I professed faith in Christ and was baptized.

Faith was easy when I was a child. My mom tells stories about finding crumpled notes in my pockets while she would sort laundry to be washed. She'd smooth out the papers to find love letters written to Jesus in my crooked handwriting. I believed that He was as close as air, and I sang made-up songs to Him while swinging on the swing set in our backyard. Part triune Creator, part invisible friend—there was no reason to doubt that God loved me and was always with me. I belonged to Him, and He belonged to me.

Growing up in a two-parent Christian home in the sequestered Bible Belt of the South, I ran into little that one could call "suffering." I had no notions of what the word even meant beyond the fear of losing a parent or the threat of the notorious springtime tornadoes that we experienced from year to year. The greatest trouble I faced was wondering whether my old, unreliable car would start in the morning or would spend another day broken down in our driveway.

Suffering was something that happened to other people. But we were *blessed*. We were different because we loved Jesus. And I thought that was enough to keep us safe from suffering. But it wasn't. What I didn't understand until decades later is that following Jesus doesn't protect you from suffering. Sometimes, following Jesus is the very path into it.

When you look at your life, your trials, unfulfilled longings, and sorrows may tell you a story of absence. Suffering may seem like a note telling you that God has left you to handle things yourself. "You're on your own. Be back soon." But when we look at the story of Scripture we see that suffering is often the letter, the

envelope, the emissary that bears a different message. Suffering may be the way God makes certain that you know the truth: *He is with you.*

God's Presence in History

Throughout the Old Testament, one of the most notable characteristics that set God apart from the pagan gods of other nations was His presence among His people. God spoke to His people directly, and He communicated through judges, prophets, and priests. He showed up in flames of fire and columns of clouds to guide His people to the land He had promised to give them. He even designated a location for His presence to dwell—the tabernacle and, later, the temple—so that His people would *know* without a doubt that He was with them.

He was different from the gods of the other nations because He was steadfast, unchanging, reliable. His presence made the people victorious in battle and drove them to their knees in reverent fear. His presence was an unmistakable demonstration of His power and holiness.

But what about today? We don't come away from prayer time with a glowing face like Moses. Though I live on a major seismic fault line, I haven't felt the earth tremble during my Bible study, and I've never been warned not to touch a mountain for fear of falling dead.

No, the presence of God in my life two thousand years after Christ has been more like the still, small voice heard by the prophet Elijah and less like the blaze of a fire or the fearsome force of a whirlwind. One major difference between Elijah's encounter with God's presence and ours, however, is that the voice he heard was audible and caused him to cover his face in fear, while the voice that we hear is wrapped in ancient words of the Bible, which remind us that we can approach God boldly, *without* fear.

He's the same God, but history was split in two when Jesus took our sin on Himself at the cross. The way we understand and experience His presence changed.¹ What hasn't changed, though, is that God's presence is meant to be our comfort—and we can trace that thread of surety throughout the history of Israel. The God who appeared in a burning bush and made His presence known in a pillar of cloud and fire, the God who dwelled in the tent in the midst of His people, the God whose glory filled the temple—this very same God is with us! He is still keeping His promise to be with us.

Jesus's incarnation, death, and resurrection ushered in the new covenant, in which the grafted-in members of God's family are afforded the wealth of His presence in our very selves. The dwelling place of God became the heart of every believer in Christ. And until we meet Him face-to-face in heaven, God's presence in our lives is sufficient to propel us through every confusing uncertainty and every painful trial.

My path toward the belief that God's presence is enough was a rocky, winding one. It took me a long time to understand that the promise of Scripture isn't that my life will be free from suffering but rather that I will feel God's nearness in it. Infertility, a floundering ministry, chronic physical pain, family instability—these are some of the things God has used in my life to teach me to trust Him and find satisfaction in His presence.

When I reflect back over my past years of struggle, I hear echoes of Eden, whispers of wilderness, cries of captivity. My longings for soul satisfaction have mirrored those of God's people throughout redemptive history, and, like the Israelites, I have worshiped both God and the things that I thought would make

1. God is the same God in all Scripture. His character remains constant throughout all of history. What I'm referring to here is *progressive revelation*. In other words, though the way we understand and have access to Him has changed with the new covenant, God Himself has not changed.

me happy. I've struggled to believe that the knowledge that God is with me could be enough for me to trust Him with my list of unanswered prayers. But what we see from the big story of the Bible is that God has promised His presence over and over to His people. In being with His people, God gave them everything they needed. When they questioned whether He was enough, they turned to worship something else. When *we* question whether He is enough, we turn to worship something else. Rejecting the truth that God's presence is enough for us will always lead us to idolatry. We're not a lot different from the Israelites, really. But we get to see an even fuller picture of God's promise of presence! As we follow the story of our present God throughout the whole Bible, we can see that the answer to what we long for is found in His unchanging, constant presence. His presence with us gives us enough comfort for our sorrows, enough contentment for our deferred hopes, enough patience for our waiting, enough perseverance for our pain. He is enough!

I want to show you that the promise of God's presence is more than a sentiment we offer ourselves when our hearts yearn for what we cannot find. I want to help you see that God uses our longings, this side of heaven, to keep us close to Him until we see Him face-to-face. As we walk through the time line of Scripture, I hope you'll see your place in God's big story. He who has kept His promise of presence throughout all history will keep that promise to you.

Part 1

What We Lost
in the Garden

1

The Fall and Everything After

There is no time in human history when you were more perfectly represented than in the Garden of Eden.

—R.C. SPROUL

On a cold February day, I found myself lying on a frigid steel operating table for the third time in seven years. One nurse applied inflatable compression wraps to my calves while another pressed a mask over my face. A stream of pure oxygen brought an odd mix of relaxation and panic to my chest. I had put off this surgery for a while because I didn't want to take the time for recovery. But then one day I couldn't talk through the pain or get up from the floor, and I knew I was out of time.

"Stupid Eve," I've often grumbled. "Why couldn't she have ignored the snake and the fruit and just said, 'No thanks; none for me today'?"

Eve's curse hasn't meant that my anguish in childbirth has increased—although, from what I hear, the pain of delivering a child isn't exactly a walk in the park. I've watched enough episodes of *Call the Midwife* to understand that it takes something beyond

normal human strength to birth a child. But I don't know that personally—because for me, Eve's curse has meant anguish over ever having children *at all*. I have endometriosis—a disease that has fused together my abdominal organs, repeatedly gripped me with blinding pain, and left me with nearly no hope of pregnancy. This surgery was another attempt to temporarily treat its effects.

Third time's the charm, I thought. I thanked the nurses awkwardly and counted backward from one hundred as medicated sleep crowded out my consciousness.

What We Lost in the Garden

Eve's curse isn't the beginning of the story. The beginning was actually very good. When God set Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, His relationship with them was unbroken. The couple enjoyed a fullness of His presence. It's hard for me to wrap my mind around that kind of friendship with God—for that is what they seemed to have: a *friendship*. In the garden, Adam and Eve had all the varieties of food a heart should desire, authority over the animal kingdom, and an up-close, face-to-face relationship with their Creator. They needed nothing more.

So when the deceiver came to Eve and suggested that she eat from the only prohibited tree in the garden, his words were weighted with the allure of more than just a tasty bite of fruit. It wasn't enough for her and Adam to simply be *with* God in Eden; they ought to pursue something *more* than God. Convinced that God was holding out on them, Adam and Eve desired to be *like* Him. In tempting them to reach for more, Satan was actually tempting them to settle for less.

Forfeiting everything that was good for them, our first parents fell headlong into idolatry and self-worship. As their teeth broke the skin of the forbidden fruit, they made a crystal-clear proclamation to God: "You are not enough for us." They had

sung the opening line of a song of dissatisfaction that we still sing today—a song that is wrapped in discontent and bent toward pride. The refrain has been sung loud and often by the people of God throughout history, and we still sing it today.

We lost a lot when sin entered the world. Everything broke: health, safety, innocence, peace. But our greatest loss was when that face-to-face relationship with God broke. “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and they hid themselves from the LORD God among the trees of the garden” (Gen. 3:8). Nestled in that verse is the moment when it all fell apart: “They hid themselves from the LORD God.” Newly awakened to what they had done, knowing what they shouldn’t know, feeling what they shouldn’t feel . . . they hid from God’s presence.

When the Lord called out for the hiding couple after they had sinned, shame was their first response, followed quickly by blame. With the taste of forbidden fruit still on their lips, the first man and woman on earth were forced from their home. Their sin of disbelief had severed that face-to-face friendship. Not until heaven will we have the kind of pre-fall relationship with God that Adam and Eve traded for the passing pleasures of sin.

Dressed in the trappings of consequence, they could no longer stand before the God they had known intimately. They could not conceal their nakedness, and they could not cover their guilt. God would have to do both. In a protective order, He forced them from their home to begin an existence marked by new enemies: sin and death. The repercussions of their sin have reached farther than they could have ever imagined.

What We Gained in the Garden

What did we gain from the fall? Disease, malfunctioning bodies, infertility, and chronic illness are proof that we live in

the fallen version of what God created to be good. But when I think of the damaging effects of sin, shame hovers near the top of the list. Guilt and shame, when harnessed rightly, can lead to real repentance—but for some of us, the lingering whisper of shame is always a breath away, bringing nagging reminders that we have missed the mark of God’s holiness.

Shame swallows the hope that we fight to believe in. It steals the confidence we have in Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross. When we sing our song of dissatisfaction, shame is the countermelody. We may sing, “You are not enough for me” in discontent and pride, or we may sing it with a bowed head and faltering faith in the sufficiency of the cross.

The fall began with Adam and Eve’s proud belief that God was inadequate. Its aftermath unfolded in a shame that wrapped itself around their hearts. It squeezed tightly every time Adam fought with the fields to produce food and when an anguished Eve strained against her own body to deliver the first child on earth. The sweat of his brow, her blood on the ground—both must have felt thick with shame over the sin they could not pay for.

Shame is a tightrope walk that has consequences on either side. Tip too far to either side, and you fall into disbelief in God’s sufficiency. A seed of doubt about God’s character blossoms in the soil of disbelief and produces the low-hanging fruit of discontent. *Maybe God isn’t enough. Maybe I need something more (or less.)* It’s what Adam and Eve thought.

The truth is that the moment Adam and Eve chose the fruit, we all needed Jesus. Adam and Eve, you and me, and everyone in between. We all needed Jesus—and, in His kind mercy, God was already sending Jesus. To the serpent, God said, “I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15). This is the first inkling of the gospel—of the way God would fix the problem of broken presence with His own presence

. . . His flesh-and-blood presence. And this promise comes fresh on the heels of the first rebellion.

The plan for a Savior had already been enacted, for it had always been the plan. God's strong, faithful love pushed back against the insidious spread of sin. He was already working out His strategy to reestablish His presence among His people. Even though they have historically bucked against His authority, He has regularly asserted His presence and reminded us of it.

Everything After

Scripture contains the history of God and His people and of their severed relationship. Always God gives Himself; always the people desire something else. His presence with them will always be enough to meet their needs, and yet they always struggle to believe that it is safe to rely only on Him. Still, through the promise of His presence, He continually lavishes faithful love on a people who half-heartedly follow Him until something seemingly better comes along. God's steadfast love for His people is expressed through His nearness—yet the people don't believe that He will be enough for them. Like their ancestors standing naked next to the tree, they cannot resist the allure of whatever they think will be more tangible and gratifying than the presence of their Creator.

This pattern is ingrained in our lives, too. Our desires well up in our chests, and we feed them with every tangible remedy we can find. Maybe we know that only Christ will suffice, but it's easier to quiet our longings with physical things that bring immediate, quantifiable relief. We may curse the curse, but we're resistant to the remedy. God has always been enough for His people, but we've always been on the lookout for something more—even though seeking satisfaction in anything “more” than God's full presence will unquestionably lead to *less*. In His presence is “fullness of joy,” the psalmist writes (Ps. 16:11 ESV). His steadfast love is *satisfying*

(see Ps. 90:14; 103:4–5). But we are bound and bent to disbelieve the truth. We think we can find fullness elsewhere.

When Yahweh began to make Himself known to His people, He made certain they knew He was with them. We can trace His persistence through the stories of the patriarchs in Genesis. God began with a man named Abram, whom he made the recipient of His promise—a promise to call a group of people who would belong to Him.

God spoke directly to Abram, changed his name to Abraham, and singled him out to receive a worldwide, history-encompassing promise of blessing: “All the peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3). The blessing required obedience, though, and it would cost Abraham the familiarity of his home, his family, and the worship of ancient Babylonian gods. God commanded Abraham to leave kin and country in order to begin a new life in a new land with a God who was utterly new to him—a God who spoke directly to him! This was an entirely new way to live, but Abraham obeyed. Undoubtedly, God’s presence with him made it clear that He would keep His word. God was laying a path of faithfulness that we can still look back on today with hope.

It was for Abraham’s good, and for our own, that God was with him. In being faithful to Abraham, God was faithful to us—because Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of the promise that Abraham was given. With each generation that we meet in Genesis—whether they’re faithful to Him or not; whether they believe His promises or not—God keeps His covenant . . . for His promise of presence wasn’t just about them.

God continued to assert His presence when He reassured Abraham’s son Isaac to “not be afraid, for I am with you” (Gen. 26:24). He later promised Isaac’s son Jacob at Bethel that He wouldn’t leave him until He’d done what He had promised. Though Jacob was a deceitful man who played favorites with

his children, God would not allow His plans to be thwarted by the foolishness of man. He was intent on keeping the promises He had made to Jacob's grandfather, Abraham. In so doing, God extended kindness and grace to generations on generations of people—including you and me. When Jacob reflected on his life, he recognized the gift of God's nearness: "He has been with me everywhere I have gone" (Gen. 35:3).

God's presence in the lives of the patriarchs reaches beyond the pages of Genesis to all those who are called the children of God. In choosing Israel, in keeping His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God prepared the way for the ultimate Reconciler He had spoken of in Genesis 3. He was already showing His people that He would stoop low to meet their needs.

A Lot Like Israel

When I was twenty-four years old, a doctor pummeled my future to its knees. She didn't mean to; she was just the messenger. As she patted me on the shoulder awkwardly, I knew that I would never recover from her words: "It is unlikely that you will ever conceive." Just like that, the future that I had assumed and imagined ended in an explosion of grief. No children. Married two years and with a lifetime ahead of me, I couldn't picture it.

Indeed, for the next decade, shards of my dreams rained down on me, slicing deep when they collided with my barrenness. I questioned the sufficiency of God's presence, His love, His provision. My unfulfilled desire for children dissolved my confidence that He was enough for me in every area of discontent I could dig up. He might be enough for me *if* He answered my prayer. Maybe. But from the moment the doctor pulled back the curtain on a childless future, I pieced together the tune of Eden and reckoned that the Lord was coming up short. He's not enough if there's something else that I want but can't have.

Just one week after my future was emptied of its contents, my pastor husband and I packed up a moving truck and began a new life in a new town, a new state, and a new church full of complete strangers. I tried to leave my new label behind me: *infertile*. But it followed me across the state line. Along with all my worldly possessions, I had also brought with me an empty womb, a bitter heart, and serious doubts about God's faithfulness. Unfamiliar as I was with circumstances that I couldn't fix, I found myself ill-equipped to minister to others in their suffering. Tunnel vision impeded my judgment, and, certain that no one could understand, I distanced myself from the new church we had joined. Not knowing that turmoil lay beneath the surface of friendly faces and full church pews, we found our fresh ministry dreams crashing down almost as soon as we darkened the door of our new assignment. Bitterness and difficult ministry do not make a good team.

A troubling ministry among strangers was difficult. Infertility felt impossible. I was aching to be filled. With a child, I thought. But the absence of children only revealed that my heart hungered for something I couldn't reach myself. We're all yearning for something down deep, and we think we know what will fill that ache. Purpose. Marriage. Children. Love. Security. Possessions. Health. Ease. Success. Validation. Insert your longing here. I knew what my own heart was truly hungry for when I held each negative pregnancy test up to the light, desperately searching for a second pink line, and again an hour later when I dug the test out of the trash to study it in case I'd missed something. I knew what would settle my anxiety when my weary husband dragged himself through the back door after a pastoral meeting at which he'd been pounded with public opinion.

A friend told me once about an elderly family member who had made a list—an actual, handwritten list on yellow stenographer's paper—of all the things that had gone wrong in his life and how he was upset with God. He would take it out and show it to

people—hopeful, I guess, that someone would commiserate and tell him how he'd been dealt a bad hand.

I remember thinking, *Why on earth would you make that list? What's to be gained from it?* That kind of record-keeping personified bitterness to me. But haven't I done the same thing? Made my list. Memorized it. Showed it to people who dared to think that I was sheltered. Held on to it like it mattered more than anything. I was always hungry, always looking for ways to cross things off that list of losses and unmet desires . . . but taking twisted satisfaction in the fact that I had a list at all. You couldn't dismiss me if I had a list, and I felt dismissed.

I am not unique. Longings and lists and validation—we all know well the trappings of discontent. Call it what you want; discontent goes by many names. We lean toward what we lack until we lack no more. We didn't fall far from that tree in Eden.

Perhaps you have a list. Maybe you've shown it to others, or maybe you've kept a quiet accounting in your heart. I want you to know that the remedy will always be found in knowing the Lord who loves you and is with you. All the way back in Eden, He was making a way to be with His people, and He hasn't changed one bit. He sees your list. He is enough for you, no matter how long your list might be.

Even in Suffering, Even in Slavery

During the final stretch of the patriarchal period, the book of Genesis makes a sharp turn, steering the narrative down one man's unlikely story. Jacob's son Joseph is known for his timely salvation of Egypt and the surrounding territories when he was put in charge of stockpiling food for an upcoming famine. But before he was known for saving Egypt from starvation, Joseph had a long, painful list of hurts, which started when he was sold into slavery by his own brothers.

But even then, Scripture surprises us by stating that God was *with* Joseph when he was taken to Egypt as a slave. Later, when he was left in prison for years after being accused of aggravated rape, the text reads, “But the LORD was with Joseph and extended kindness to him” (Gen. 39:21).

God extended *kindness* to Joseph through *suffering*. That rubs, doesn’t it? Surely that’s not kindness! After Joseph was pulled from prison to interpret the Pharaoh’s dreams of impending famine, we can glimpse God’s goodness in his preserving a generation from starvation. God used Joseph’s wisdom to save his own backstabbing family. But back when he was a forgotten slave in a dark, Egyptian prison, God was with Joseph, and *it was a kindness to him*. God’s presence was enough for Joseph to persevere, and this presence was the gift that He kept giving.

Joseph reconciled with his family and moved them to Egypt. Years later, they had multiplied so greatly that the new leadership of Egypt enslaved them in order to control them. They languished as slaves for hundreds of years until God suddenly appeared to a stuttering runaway Hebrew adoptee. When Moses encountered the never-burning, burning bush, God told him to remove his sandals and come no further, for the ground was holy. He commissioned Moses to rescue the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and promised that He would go with Moses. This should have been enough for Moses. The Almighty had appeared in a burning bush that didn’t burn up! Yet still Moses voiced his uncertainty. So God pulled out a few signs and miracles to show Moses what He could and would do in front of Pharaoh.

When Moses encouraged the Israelite slaves that God had promised to be their God and to be with them, they didn’t listen “because of their broken spirit and hard labor” (Ex. 6:9). Through ten plagues, a reluctant leader with a speech impediment, and a hard-hearted Pharaoh, God delivered His people, brandishing His power as only an omnipotent God can. Why?

I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. And they will know that I am Yahweh their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, *so that I might dwell among them*. I am Yahweh their God. (Ex. 29:45–46)

God delivered Israel so that He could dwell with them, but the idolatry of Egypt was far more familiar to Israel than Yahweh was. The plagues, the wonders, the delivery from such long bondage—God made it clear that this shift meant something. He was their God—and no one, and nothing, else. No little idols of Egypt had delivered them. Not the sun or the moon or any created thing that the Egyptians bowed to. No, Israel now belonged to her Creator. God alone was responsible for the supernatural plagues that had chipped away at Egypt’s confidence in retaining the Israelites as slaves. He alone sent the angel to take the breath of every firstborn son in every house that was not marked with the blood of a spotless lamb. The people didn’t know about Jesus, but their need for Him throbbed with every opportunity they failed to trust Yahweh.

They obeyed blindly at first. When given freedom, you don’t question it. But when the novelty wore off and hardship made its presence known, God’s powerful presence didn’t seem to be enough for them. Upward floated Eden’s familiar refrain: “You are not enough for us.” At the precipice of doubt, the people leaned in to their disbelief.

God wasn’t surprised. He’d taken them the long way out of Egypt because He knew they’d be tempted to turn back: “The people will change their minds and return to Egypt if they face war,” He said (Ex. 13:17). He knew they would bend beneath doubt. To bolster their confidence in His protection, God “went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to lead them on their way during the day and in a pillar of fire to give them light at night, so that they could travel day or night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night *never left its place in front of the people*”

(Ex. 13:21–22). He set His unmistakable presence in front of the people for twenty-four hours a day in order to guide and protect them. Never did He leave them. Never.

When Pharaoh's army came running after the Israelites, when they were trapped between the sea and the Egyptian army, when they questioned God while He was *in their midst*, He never left them. God opened up the Red Sea and called the people to walk through the middle of it. He pulled the waters apart and led more than a million people through on a dry path. They only had to trust Him and walk. And because it was the only way out, they did. They stood on the other side and watched the Lord conquer their enslavers in one sweeping stroke as He stitched together the waters of the Red Sea. Cloud, fire, rent waters, dead army. God was with them. His presence meant something.

Momentarily, the Israelites seemed to understand who they were following: "When Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and believed in Him and in His servant Moses" (Ex. 14:31). But their resolve was short-lived. Mere days after the destruction of their enemies, the rumble of hunger in their bellies and the dryness of their throats caused the people to question Yahweh again. Ignoring the cloud and fire, forgetting a split sea and an army of dead Egyptian soldiers, the Israelites grumbled against Yahweh for allowing them to be thirsty.

He provided water, of course, but that didn't mean that they stopped complaining when they felt hungry. "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by pots of meat and ate all the bread we wanted. Instead, you brought us into this wilderness to make this whole assembly die of hunger!" (Ex. 16:3)

All this complaining and mistrust came quick on the heels of the Red Sea crossing. Their skepticism is impressive! They were hemmed in by the presence of God in fire and clouds.

Yet *my* memory may actually be shorter than theirs. Sitting on a side of the cross that they could never imagine, I struggle to remember the Lord's faithfulness. At the first sign of adversity, I question everything about Him. That first year of negative pregnancy tests began the unraveling of my confidence in Him. The Israelites wanted to be certain that they wouldn't go without food and water. I wanted to be certain that I wouldn't go without children. I would have fit in well among the complaining, grumbling Israelites. I would have led the altos in the song "You are not enough for me."

Like Israel complaining about food when God's presence burned around them, we are foolish to believe that we need God plus something else. You may be tempted to think that if He would just do *this one thing*, then you could be happy in Him. But beneath our desires is one desire that must be met in God. Created to worship Him, we will burn up with misplaced desires if we put anything above Him.

Whatever plagues your heart with longing cannot be answered satisfactorily outside God's faithful presence. He might give you every tangible desire you could ever dream up, but if your heart is not satisfied in Him, you will never stop yearning for more.

We may look at Israel's fragile faith and feel frustration over our own lack of trust, but even in the wreckage of human doubts, the Lord's steadfast nearness shines brightly. Face-to-face with Adam and Eve in the garden, faithfully close to Joseph in his prison, and undoubtedly present at the edges of the Red Sea, He has always been enough.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the loss of God's face-to-face presence in the garden affect the way that you think about the consequences of sin?

2. Is there an area of your life in which you feel that God is withholding something good from you? How do you fight the temptation to believe that He is not enough for you in that area?
3. Read Romans 8:1–2. Sin severed Adam and Eve’s relationship with God, and shame sent them into hiding. How should we as Christians think about shame in light of Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross and the presence of the Holy Spirit in us?
4. In Genesis 39, God displayed kindness to Joseph in his suffering. How does the paradox of God’s goodness in our suffering help us to persevere? Explain why a biblical approach to suffering might help Christians offer hope to an unbelieving world.
5. If you had witnessed the ten plagues, Israel’s exodus from Egypt, the pillar of cloud and of fire, and the parting of the Red Sea, do you think you would have doubted God’s faithfulness like the Israelites did? What reasons do you have to trust that God will continue to be faithful to you?