



the promise is
His Presence

WHY GOD IS ALWAYS ENOUGH

glenna
marshall

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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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

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgments | 7 |
| Introduction: Like a Recurring Dream | 11 |
| Part 1: What We Lost in the Garden | |
| 1. The Fall and Everything After | 21 |
| 2. Wandering | 35 |
| 3. A Place to Dwell | 49 |
| 4. The King We Need | 63 |
| 5. Waiting in Silence | 79 |
| Part 2: What We Gained at the Cross | |
| 6. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel | 95 |
| 7. Never Alone | 111 |
| 8. Always Present | 127 |
| Part 3: God's Presence Now and Forever | |
| 9. You Are Enough for Me | 143 |
| 10. The Ministry of Presence | 159 |
| 11. Free from Longing and Face-to-Face | 175 |

Acknowledgments

I like to think of writing as a solitary activity. And mostly that's true. I've never birthed a baby—a fact you'll see soon enough, in the following pages—but I imagine that the anticipation I've felt while laboring to write the words of this book has been a tiny bit like waiting for a child to arrive. While birth is largely a solitary effort, there are usually a lot of helpful people involved who make the experience as smooth as possible. I'd like to thank the people in my life who helped me birth this book.

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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?