

Deep Waters:
Lift Your Gaze

KIM M. CLARK

Deep Waters: Lift Your Gaze.

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Dedication

I lovingly dedicate this book to J.B. and J.C.
May both you always lift your gaze
to your God.

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Trial: *noun* | tri-al

a test of faith, patience or
stamina through subjection
to suffering or temptation¹

Foreword

THERE ARE SEVERAL subjects that Christians are not in agreement about and hold diverse views and interpretation on. One of those subjects is trials and suffering. How often do we hear someone ask, “Why do Christians suffer?” or “Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?” These and related questions cannot not be ignored or brushed off as irrelevant. God’s people face them daily.

While some Christian scholars, authors, and theologians have avoided tackling the important subject of trials and suffering, Kim M. Clark has done a commendable job of taking the bull by its horns in authoring *Deep Waters: Lift Your Gaze*. She has faithfully, practically, and biblically addressed the inevitability of trials, the reason for trials, our response to trials, and our greatest need.

The inclusion, in each chapter, of a topical biblical story and perspective on seeking God during today’s trials is uplifting and edifying, and the accompanying prophetic words and poems are precious and superb. It is the very depths of the poignant application questions and prayer journal at the end of each chapter that inspire the reader to lift

Deep Waters: *Lift Your Gaze*

their gaze to God and away from their trials, troubles, frustrations, challenges, and temptations.

Kim is not some ivory-tower author. Her concern and care for her readers is demonstrated in the last section of each chapter, where she pours out her heartfelt intercessory prayer for each reader. As a scholar, author, and Christian educator, I found this aspect of each chapter to be unique, spiritual, and inspiring.

I would highly recommend *Deep Waters: Lift Your Gaze* to any reader who hungers to study, understand, and appreciate the what and why of trials and suffering. Kim's faith, zeal, and passion will no doubt encourage readers to not focus their gaze on trials and suffering but to fix their eyes "on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:2–3 NIV).

Dr. Wilbroad Chanda
Pastor, Christ Community Church
Principal, Copperbelt Pastors College
Zambia, Africa

SECTION I

*The Nature
of Trials*

F O R E T A S T E

Deep Waters

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

~ ISAIAH 43:1-3 *emphasis mine*

I WAS BEYOND OVERWHELMED—felt like I was drowning in deep waters. A struggling single mom of a small child, I was working for a Christian mission organization and things were beyond tight financially. Taking this job had been a step in faith; the salary was only an eighth of what I’d made as an information technology sales and marketing executive. Now my savings were depleted, the bills were stacking up, and I had no idea how to make ends meet.

As I ran my hands through my hair, I crumbled into a sobbing mess on my desk. The budget numbers didn’t add up. My expenses exceeded my income exponentially. I had cut everything I possibly could and had even stopped eating meals to save money. It was futile. Nothing was working.

I didn't have the strength to go on anymore. Sleep evaded me. I was weary—hungry, tired, and lonely. Doing everything on my own was too hard. I was responsible for all the home care and child-rearing, acting as decision maker, plumber, disciplinarian, homework helper, cook, maid, income earner, nurse, counselor, chauffeur, gardener, cupcake baker, fireman, gutter cleaner, booboo kisser, repairman, and anything-else-that-needed-to-be-done person.

I was *it*, and *it* was exhausted.

Shaking my fist, I cried out to God, “You brought me here! I told you I wanted to work for your kingdom. I trusted that you would take care of things. Your word says, ‘Seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be provided for you’” (Matt 6:33 HCSB).

After a deep breath, my angry monologue continued, “And I've sought you with my whole heart, but I'm missing the providing part, God! I need your help!”

Shoulders slumped, I whimpered. Then I paced back and forth across my office. Finally, I flopped back down in my office chair completely dejected.

I didn't think about how God had always provided for me, how he always came through, or how even as a single mom I was able to afford to send my child to an expensive private school, drive a clean, dependable Honda sedan with leather seats and a sunroof, and live in a three-bedroom, two-and-half-bath home with a tall wooden fenced-in backyard in a safe neighborhood—all on a ministry salary. Nope, I was focused solely on what I perceived was my all-encompassing life problem: not enough money (that I could see) in the bank to pay the bills.

I was looking at my life through the eyes of the flesh, not the eyes of faith.

Taking another deep breath and slowly exhaling, I reminded myself of the definition of faith: “to be sure of the things we hope for, certain of what we cannot see” (Hebrews 11:1 GNT).

At the end of my own strength and sufficiency, I prayed. I laid my hands on my bills and declared, “God, these are yours. I did what you asked. I took a job to work for your kingdom. Please provide the funds each month to meet all my bills. In Jesus’ name I pray.”

Definition of faith:
“to be sure of the
things we hope for,
certain of what we
cannot see”

~ HEBREWS 11:1

Interestingly enough, things didn’t turn around quickly. I still had that sickening feeling every time a letter with a due date came in the mail. I would try not to cry. Looking up, I would say, “I trust you despite what it looks like, God.”

Drawing on my creativity, I found fun things to do that didn’t cost money. My little one and I went to the park, the library, and every free festival in town. I strived to keep on a happy face, be a good mommy, and laugh often—even though we were sinking deeper into financial abyss.

Maybe you too are experiencing a fire so intense that you might think God has forgotten you. Even the thought of taking another step is paralyzing. Perhaps you’ve also prayed for this difficult situation to be taken from you, but it remains like a weight crushing your chest, making living near impossible. Or maybe you know someone who is going through a horrific trial and your heart breaks for them.

Even though we all know hardships are a part of life, no matter how much we pray, they are still brutal. Trials hurt. No one is exempt from the pain. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, we will and do suffer while on earth. Just browse any newsfeed to witness the horrors.

One thing I've realized is that the pain from our trials provides a unique opportunity for exponential growth. It is during those dark times that we mine deep into resources we never knew we had. We uncover that burst of strength and peace that we didn't know even existed. Then, and only then, are we able to pull out of our pain and suffering.

Thankfully, when we are weak, God is strong. He even declares it: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' ... For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). He is faithful. He knows our prayers and the desires of our heart before we even formulate them (Romans 8:37).

Even with faith in God, receiving comfort can be difficult. When I was walking through our trial, instead of getting better, my heart seemed to break even more. Reading the Bible, receiving wise counsel, and praying only provided temporary solace. Sometimes I experienced waves of tranquility, but how quickly could one errant thought or word suck me back into the powerful rip currents of despair. It was a constant battle for me. Actually doing menial tasks was heart-wrenching as one morning I wept while making breakfast for my four-year-old. Beautiful brown eyes looked at me with compassion as my preschooler wisely declared, "Don't cry Mommy. You have Jesus."

I smiled, wiped my eyes, and silently whispered, "Out of the mouth of babes." Then I got down on my knees and dissolved into an emotional puddle. I prayed for enough strength to get through the day as little, warm, sticky arms wrapped around my neck and squeezed me tight.

"Don't cry, Mommy.
You have Jesus."

~ MY PRESCHOOLER

Trusting God in our darkest moments requires a degree of fortitude that isn't natural. This forced act of obedience is available only through the grace of God. I remember both physically and spiritually struggling to lift my gaze to him. It is during these dark times that I have been blessed to hear God speak to my heart through his Holy Spirit. And it is through those words that I have received great comfort and peace.

One day as I walked along a sandy shoreline with my child playing nearby, I angrily forced my toes into the wet sand and brooded over my situation. I was oblivious to the joy of the beach, the laughter of children, and the comfort coming from crashing waves. It was then I heard the Lord speak to my heart ...

Deep Waters

O afflicted one, storm-tossed and not comforted, I see your pain. Lift your gaze. Look at me. Focus on me, not your problems or concerns. You are mine. I have you. And I have this.

Do you trust me? Do you see the waters?

Look to the left, look straight out, and look to the right.

Do you see an end to my waters?

I carry them all in the palm of my hand. For I have measured them. They are mine. As is everything teeming in them.

I know your heart. I know it is heavy. For I know your pain. I formed the earth and laid its foundations. I knew you before you were even conceived. I knew you would be facing this trial. For I know your frame. I created you. And I have allowed this situation to come to pass. For I use all things for good, especially the hopeless ones. That is what makes me God. For you are not.

You are my child. My chosen vessel. I have paid a great price for you.

I AM God. There is nothing too hard for me.

I've got this. And I've got you.

Lift your gaze.



I exhaled. Though my heart felt heavy, I obeyed—looked out over the water. Just beyond where the glistening waves began, a school of dolphins swam, squealing and jumping in and out of the water. I smiled despite myself. They sounded like they were laughing and playing in the surf. Their joy transfixed me.

My shoulders relaxed, and I watched them for over an hour. A supernatural sense of peace washed over me. God had given me a multi-faceted gift—confirmation of his sovereignty, validation that he is the one true God, justification of his omnipotence, and sanction of his love for me, his child.

Thankfully, it is during these faith-testing times that God never leaves us nor forsakes us (Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 13:5). Those are the very times he is closest to us. During a season of suffering,

the Lord gave me the words for this book. He declared, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God” (Isaiah 40:1).

For me, even the thought of writing this book was a trial. Some people come out of the womb with the gift of writing. Their words seem to leap out onto their laptops like gazelles bounding up steep ravines, making perfect prose. That has *never* been the case for me. Writing has always been an arduous process; I even had my husband proofread my emails.

As I wrestled with God over writing this book, I stubbornly told him, “You’ve called the wrong person, Lord. You know I can’t write. You made me.” Unbelievably, he was stretching me in other areas as well. He was telling me to run, something I was never good at. In school, maintaining some sort of cardiovascular strength for sports was always a necessary evil. Now in my late-forties, I felt the Lord was telling me run *and* to write—two activities I absolutely abhorred.

In grumbling obedience, I ran. Eventually I could run a mile, and in over a year, five miles—which for me was nothing short of epic. Then one day as I started one of my long five-mile runs, I prayed for the Lord to bless it. This time, I heard him say to me, “I want you to add a mile to your run today.”

I stopped stretching. “Wow, that would be six miles—a 10K! Well, Lord, you made this body and you know its limits.”

In compliant faith, I ran the entire distance easily. Afterward, I praised and thanked God in stunned disbelief, telling him (as if he didn’t already know), “I have never run that far before. That’s a 10K! Thank you, Lord, for the strength and endurance to run six miles. I’ve never been a runner before.”

Then he clearly said, “You’ve never written a book before either.”

Stunned, I hung my head with the conviction of his reprimand heavy on my heart, and walked home.

The Lord had me continue to add more miles, and before I knew it, I was training for a half-marathon—13.1 miles! During one of my long training runs, I cried out to God, “Lord, I’m so tired. Can I just skip this mile-long loop?”

Gently, he said, “There are no shortcuts, my beloved. You can’t truncate the process.” I knew God was also referring to weariness from my trial, for he knew my heart. His words resonated deep in my soul. I chewed on them as a child works a piece of bubble gum.

“There are no shortcuts, my beloved. You can’t truncate the process.”

~ GOD

No matter how difficult it is, we can’t shorten our times of suffering either. We must take each step, each day, and each trial in full measure, even though the length is indeterminable. Afflictions must run their course; we need to allow for the ebb and flow of their pain. We can’t water them down or

skip them, no matter how agonizing they are. The encouraging and sometimes forgotten realization is that they’re only for a season. They do eventually pass, we just don’t know when. Unfortunately, trials don’t come with expiration dates.

Even with these revelations, I still struggled with the Lord’s directive to write. I continued to cry out to him. I felt like a kindergartner having a tantrum and stomping her feet instead of just sitting down to obediently tie her shoes.

I stubbornly told God, “Lord, you created me in my mother’s womb. You made me to swim like a duck, not to climb trees like a squirrel or write a book. I think you called the wrong person.”

God was silent.

My moaning continued, “God, you’re asking me to do the impossible, like having a duck climb a tree.” Dejected and full of self-pity, I prayed. As I cried out to him, I saw a picture of a flourishing coconut tree with large, deep green palm leaves. The tree had grown parallel to the ground and this duck was happily waddling up the trunk, quacking loudly all the way.

The Lord spoke to my heart, “See, I can even make trees grow crooked to accomplish my will.”

Apparently, there is no point in arguing with an omnipotent, all-powerful God.

So I acquiesced to become both a writer and a runner, and it was during those long training runs, when it was just the rhythmic sound of my feet pounding against the pavement, that I most clearly heard from God. It seemed after I humbled myself, stopped telling God what I wanted him to do, and just listened, I was finally comforted. Those revelations I received while running were my personal lifeline and the fodder for this book.

Instead of turning from God, I pressed in even harder. I prayed that if God would not lift this trial from us, then he would give me the grace to endure. Now, after completing my second 26.2-mile marathon and finishing this book, I am once again awed by God.

This book is the fruit of my obedience to become one of God’s scribes. And if God can use me, he can use you. It seems that God uses those who have gone through the flames of affliction, to go back and pour water on those still going through the fire.

Trials don’t
come with
expiration dates.

It seems that God uses those who have gone through the flames of affliction, to go back and pour water on those still going through the fire.

It is my hope this book will lift your gaze to God as you're going through times of suffering. For clarity, I have divided the book into four sections on trials: the nature of trials, the reasons for them, our response to them, and our greatest need. Each chapter includes several gems: topical biblical stories with present-day applications; supporting prophetic words/poems; my heartfelt intercessory prayers for the readers of this book,

followed by application questions; and a prayer journal to apply God's Word to your situation.

In my opinion, the prophetic words and my prayers for you, the reader, are the sweetest and most encouraging portions of the book. These are the bright red bow on the biblical truths in each chapter. They are confirmation that our struggles are real, hard, and faith-challenging, and that God is not deaf to our cries. This book can be used individually or in a group setting. You can dive as deep as you want into the bottomless sea of God's love. Allow time to pause, reflect, and apply the Word of God to your life. Let God's words heal, comfort, and give you peace.

If you do decide to go through this book in a group setting, please be sensitive to others and do not share someone else's pain. Before you're tempted to share what someone else has said, ask yourself, *Am I part of the problem or solution?* If you're not part of the solution, then you don't have permission to repeat what they've said. You want to establish and maintain a confidential foundation for your group. It needs to be a safe place for everyone to share. Start each gathering

with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to meet all of you, guard against gossip, and comfort you as you read and apply his Word to your life.

God is a miracle worker. Sometimes he answers prayers in ways we would never imagine. As a suggestion, when God answers your prayers, date and write them in the prayer journal section in red or another color. Journaling and recording God's responses to our prayers fans the flames of our faith, especially when we go back and reread them. It's encouraging to see how an awesome, all-powerful, and transcendent God loves us enough to not only hear our prayers but also answer them as well!

I pray this book is a source of comfort for you or someone you love. As the words in this book have comforted me and brought me closer to God, it is my prayer that you experience the same. Draw close to him and allow God, through his Word, to completely envelope you in his loving, protective arms. He made you, formed your innermost being, and only he can console you in ways you never imagined possible.

Lift your gaze, my friend.

Lift your gaze.



Lift Your Gaze

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will *fear no evil, for you are with me*; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and *I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

~ PSALM 23:4-6 *emphasis mine*

THOSE WORDS WERE hard to swallow, especially today. My breathing was labored. I was terrified. In an attempt for serenity, I went for a run. A wall of humidity greeted me. It was like breathing through a wet rag.

I ran slowly, methodically, trying to propel my body through the thick, sticky mist. My legs were not cooperating. They felt like they were incased in cement. My heart was fearful, and with nothing else left of my physical strength, I prayed, “God, just tell me what to do.”

We had moved to Florida from Delaware a few weeks earlier, and the mother-of-all-hurricanes, Irma, was barreling down on the state of Florida like a huge boot sole over an ant. Wind speeds were estimated at over 185 miles per hour. I had never driven that fast and

had no concept of what we or our house would be like after being hit with winds or objects that flew through the air at that speed.

The power company called with terse yet automated messages. We were told to prepare for being without electricity for a minimum of a week during a sweltering-hot summer. Translation: no air conditioning, no refrigeration, no lights, and no cable television for updates. The meteorologists on The Weather Channel spewed out hurricane facts like an overheated computer. The entire state was told to brace for “catastrophic” devastation. Our area was told not to evacuate, but to hunker down, board up our windows, seal all our personal belongings (especially photos and framed prints) in double plastic trash bags with duct tape, and wait out the storm in an interior room padded with mattresses.

Running that day did nothing to calm my nerves. My husband, a former longtime Florida resident, was away on a business trip. He would return right before the tempest was expected to hit our area. Just recently unpacked from our move to the state, I was attempting to prepare for a hurricane alone with our precocious six-year-old. People hoarded bottled water, canned food, and gasoline. The lines at the grocery stores were at least ten carts long, blocking all the aisles, and most gas stations were out of fuel.

Sometimes, despite our effort, we know we’re about to enter “the valley of the shadow of death” and yet there is nothing we can do about it. We know it’s going to be disastrous, yet God in his sovereignty has ordained for us to ride out the storm. He is telling us to be still and trust him (Psalm 46:10). Those words were too difficult for me to comprehend right now though. And running provided little to no solace during the chaos.

Still running, I again prayed, “Lord, just tell me what to do. Do I buy a generator? Do I ignore the warnings and flee with my son? Just speak, my God. Your servant is listening.”

The response?

Silence.

Then I saw it, and the image was breathtaking.

I saw a huge hand. My husband, son, and I were placed gently in its enormous palm. The hand closed, protecting my family from the storm. Despite the fierce wind, pelting rain, and angry swirling tornadoes, we were protected by the shielding hand of God. After the tempest passed, the massive hand slowly opened and we emerged completely unscathed from the wrath of the storm. We were dazed and amazed at the destruction and devastation around us yet were in awe of the level of fortification bestowed upon us.

Then I heard it: “I take care of and uphold my children, even in the midst of the storm.” I stopped running and a tear of gratitude slid down my cheek.

Despite the heat, humidity, and generalized societal trauma of an impending mother-of-all-hurricanes approaching, I felt the peace of God. I received and embedded the revelation in my heart. “He’s got this. He’s got us. He’s not going to remove the storm; he’s going to protect and uphold us.” I exhaled out.

As my pastor once said, “God either calms the storm or calms the child.” This time, as I lifted my gaze to God, he calmed me, his child.

Some time ago, during another trial, a person asked me why my situation was so

“I take care of and uphold my children, even in the midst of the storm.”

~ GOD

traumatic for me. He brushed off my pain like a housefly at a picnic. I smiled sympathetically at his response and told him that was one of the very premises of this book. Trials are unique, just like each person. And because each one is distinct, we all respond differently. There are no exact replicas of any storm or person, just resemblances. An incident or circumstance that derails one person's world may not elicit even a blink for another.

Sometimes trials don't pass quickly like a hurricane; they linger for far too long. And when our world is shaken repeatedly, everything we know and hold dear is irrevocably changed.

Even if we believe in God, we can start to question the allowance of such intense continued pain. We might wonder, *Is God really on my side?* and *How can a good God allow this to happen?* or *What did I do to deserve this?*

Sometimes we can get stuck in a loop, repeating the memory of when the trial first began. We distinctly remember *that* day when our life completely derailed. We even fool ourselves that if we'd responded differently, that could have altered the outcome.

Despite the specifics of the cause of the trial or storm, two things remain the same: they are hard, and our emotional and spiritual states are extremely volatile and unpredictable. Our emotions are like a bouncing ping-pong ball in a cement room—they're all over the place. On some days we just glide through life so easily that people around us have no idea of the magnitude of insanity swirling around us. Other days we're barking at everyone, feeling like we're trudging through quicksand and wondering if this will ever end. And just when as we think we're doing a decent job of keeping everything together, we come unhinged and dissolve into a crying mess or explode into a fit of anger in the grocery store.

Unfortunately, some of us can also get trapped in the darkness. The initial pain from the cold, hard, and empty place of self-isolation has started to become familiar. It now sadly has evolved into a false sense of security. We receive comfort from the pain. Perhaps we rest firmly in the false belief that our God has left us. We woefully trudge through life, leaving a trail of dismay behind us. We wear our trial like a badge of courage and dominate every conversation with it by dramatically swinging it up on the table with a loud, resounding thud. Surrounded by the deep waters of depression and hopelessness, we fear that those very waters that once isolated us and comforted us from the pain are about to pull us down to a depth that we will never emerge from.

Trials also create a desperate craving for comfort. In a feeble attempt for consolation, we can turn to outlets like social media only to find everyone else is living a life of rainbows, unicorns, and cupcakes. Or we can turn to other vices to medicate the pain, like food, sex, alcohol, or drugs. After the initial taste, these idols leave us feeling even more empty.

God only prunes the fruitful, and he uses trials to do it. Even as he is expertly and mercifully removing the old, he gives us enough grace to endure the pruning. The act of removing the unnecessary is usually the most painful part. We want to hold on to the very things that have provided solace in the past but are no longer useful—like a comfortable yet worn-out old sweater full of holes. We don't even realize the things we use for relief are the very things that imprison us. God has better things in store than false security blankets; he wants us to ascend to higher heights, trusting in him completely.

As we emerged from that hurricane, I felt like God had trimmed the entire state

God only prunes the fruitful, and he uses trials to do it.

of Florida. All the dead leaves, branches, and trees without a strong and deep root system were demolished and removed. Only the clean, green, lush foliage remained. Likewise, sometimes God uses trials or hurricanes in our lives to remove all the lifeless, unusable, and obstructive idols that unknowingly impede our spiritual growth.

Trials can also make us feel like we're suffocating. We need the influx of God's Spirit so desperately that our bodies crave it. Some of us can become too saturated in self-pity and anguish to even begin to lift our gaze. And we can forget that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28 NIV).

But sometimes our trials or storms last for years or even decades, like times in the wilderness. Those long-lasting ones can be the hardest to endure and are the easiest way to lose our faith.

The two million Israelites had that same crisis of faith as they wandered through the wilderness for forty years after they escaped bondage in Egypt. They seemed just like me: daily fearful of the unknown, looking back to the oppression of slavery with rose-colored glasses, and desperately wanting some solace from normalcy.

These Israelites, like me before Christ, were delivered from a life of barbaric servitude, but still yearned for the security of captivity that Egypt provided. They had structure in Egypt, living in homes and eating vegetables and fruit they grew in their own gardens. They were also cruelly beaten and forced into backbreaking manual labor with limited resources. Their male children were heartlessly slaughtered at birth. All because the ruler of Egypt at that time, Pharaoh, saw their strength in numbers and the fruit of their anointing as God's chosen race. He feared them and made their life in Egypt excruciating.

Despite the evil swirling around them, God delivered them through the faith of one man, Moses. God placed the Israelites in the wilderness to grow them, stretch them, and change their mind-sets from that of a slave to that of a warrior. This process needed time—forty years' worth of time, to be exact.

God *was* and *is* a bondage-breaker. He does the same for us during our trials, storms, and times in the wilderness. He breaks the bondage of the lies of slavery in our life, making us free. Unfortunately, this process usually takes longer and is more painful than we'd like.

Our times in the wilderness are so hard for us because our focus is on the gift, not the giver. God supernaturally provided the Israelites food each day, called *manna* or “bread from heaven.” He did this for forty years! Manna was a white substance like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey (Exodus 16:31). It was a gift from God, presented to them every morning for six days a week.

God *was* and *is* a bondage-breaker.

His instructions were clear: They were to gather only what they needed for themselves and their family for that day. On the sixth day, they were provided a double portion so they could rest on the seventh day, the Sabbath. If they tried to save any for the next day on any other day, it would become filled with worms and rot (Exodus 16:20).

Manna, God's sustenance, is like grace. God only gives us enough for each day. “Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matthew 6:34), and sufficient for today is its own grace. We can't store manna or grace. Neither one keeps. Each day we receive our daily portion. In doing so, we must lift our gaze in gratitude to God, the giver, and not to the gift.

For the Israelites during their time in the wilderness, God had them depend on him for everything, even which direction daily to walk. That level of dependency was essential for their growth as warriors. It was probably the most terrifying part of the wilderness—trusting God for *everything*. It must have been very humbling. I would have had repeated meltdowns.

Our times in the wilderness are so hard for us because our focus is on the gift, not the giver.

Even though God provided every day for the Israelites in the wilderness, they didn't appreciate it, and sometimes we don't either. God allows us to experience the fruit of our self-sufficiency to bring us to our darkest hour so that we, like the Israelites, cry out only to him. It is during those times we wonder where God has been during our time of suffering. Mercifully, he is there, actively protecting us from something far worse. Those are the very moments when God is gently moving us out of our pain.

These trials, storms, and afflictions in the wilderness that God allows in our lives are the perfect soil for a miracle. Those times when no hope exists for anything in the natural are the times when his grace is the sweetest. We sense God's presence drawing close to us. He opens those eternal floodgates of love, and we feel his breath upon us, giving us fresh wind—just like he gave me that picture of him upholding my family in his hand during the hurricane. Those sweet moments of grace give us the power to focus squarely on the giver, our God.

The joy we once had is ours again! That joy is based on the posture of our hearts, not the situation. The trial, storm, or wilderness may still be present, but our perspective, or rather our heart, has changed. We are now focused on God, for whatever we focus on gets bigger.

Let me restate that: *Whatever we focus on gets bigger.*

Just like Peter walking on water toward his God during the storm, if we take our eyes off God during our trial, we will also sink (Matthew 14:22–23).

Thankfully, God is always there for us, pulling us back up, refocusing our gaze.

If we are singularly focused on our trials, our trials get bigger than God. If we lift our gaze and look to our God instead of our trials, our God becomes bigger. When we, like Peter, see our God is greater than our time of suffering and comprehend our God is stronger than our deep waters, then we will experience that peace that transcends all human understanding even though the waves and wind continue to roar around us.

There is hope for all of us in our season of trials. It may not come in a little package with a pretty bow around it as we imagined. Maybe God doesn't remove the trial, storm, or time in the wilderness; perhaps he only provides an outpouring of his living waters and the grace to endure it.

We are his precious possession, and even though we're being brought through the purifying fires of a trial, we are loved. The Lord is the God of the living. He is the God of restoration.

We *can* experience the fullness of his joy during a time of suffering—a joy that transcends our situation. And this joy is not idol-induced, but rather God-induced. When our Creator permeates us with his Spirit, especially during a trial, there is no other earthly experience that can compare. Sometimes, as we are struggling through a trial and when we have lost our joy and hope, even our closest friends and trusted counselors can't rescue us from our deep waters. During these times we need to turn to our Creator, the one who knows every

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Whatever we focus on gets bigger.

cell in our bodies. He knows our frame and every function of it. He alone is the best candidate to perform our much-needed spiritual tune-up or complete overhaul.

My prayer is that you would feel his closeness and tenderness. Through immersing yourself in his Word, the Holy Bible, and through prayer, he will comfort you. Again, he might not deliver you from your situation, but he will console you.

The anointing that comes so freely from the depths of his grace will completely cover you. Only he possesses the most powerful healing tool ever known to man: his love. God loves us so much that he gave up his most treasured possession for us: his one and only Son.

You may have never heard about God's son, Jesus Christ, who came to die for you. He paid the penalty in full for all your sins on the barbaric instrument of Roman torture, the cross. The very thing you crave and are searching for—God's love—is only accessible through the sacrificial death Jesus endured. That love is the very elixir from our Creator that is so freely given to all who still feel empty despite the false promises of this world.

If that is you, then the Lord God, your Creator, would want you to call out to him in prayer and ask him for his help. Pray aloud or to yourself:

Lord, I need you. I am a sinner. I am not perfect. I have done things that I wish I hadn't. I need you, Jesus, in my heart. Fill me with your presence through your Holy Spirit. I repent of my sins and declare you, Jesus Christ, as my personal Savior.

By praying this prayer, you have confessed with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and has died for you. You have repented of your sins. You have now placed your faith in Jesus as your personal Savior, and are reconciled with your Creator, your holy and perfect God. My prayer for you is as you open your heart to Jesus, you finally feel fulfilled and are immersed in the amazing love that comes so freely from God through his Holy Spirit.

Despite the trials, storms, and times in the wilderness that God has lovingly permitted to permeate my life, solely by his grace I rebound back to truth: God will work *all* things for good, including this trial. God has called me according to his purpose. God is using my trials to force me to draw closer to him. This book is the fruit of Romans 8:28 in my life.

So I made a choice. I prayed again.

This time God spoke.

And oh, did he speak ...

Lift Your Gaze

*W*hy are you so downcast, my beloved? Am I not the God of seeing?

I see your affliction! I see you! I see your trials! Am I not the God of hearing? I hear your groans. Am I not the God of creation? Didn't I create the world and everything in it? Am I not the God of the universe? Didn't I create the stars, the moon, the sun, and all the planets? Am I not a *big*

God? Am I not your God? Didn't I send my one and only Son to save you? Didn't he pay the price for your sins, so you will not perish in hell but instead have eternity with *me*?

Is anything too hard for ME? Am I not the God of all flesh? Have I not created you? Don't I know your frame? Don't I see your pain? Your weaknesses? Your frailness? Don't I keep every one of your tears in a bottle?

Despite what you feel, I AM close to you. Have I ever left you or forsaken you?

Am I not larger, stronger, more amazing, and more awesome than your trials?

I AM immutable, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, and unwavering in my steadfast love, care, and provision for you. Again, I have *never* left you nor forsaken you.

Lift your gaze, my child! Look to the God who has saved you. Look to me, the God who allowed his only Son to die for your transgressions, so you can have sweet communion and eternal life with me.

Therefore, I cannot and will not withhold any good gift from you. For I have not withheld my only Son as propitiation for your sins. I have done this so you can boldly approach my throne of grace. Come to me. Come and see. Taste and see. Feel my grace. Be overcome with my love. Inhale my Holy Spirit. Ignite those fires that once burned so bright for me. Forgive those who have sinned against you, as I have forgiven you. Remember, ALL things work together for good to those who love me and are called

according to my purposes. And that would be you. You are my chosen one, my child, my bride, and the one I have paid the highest price for; I have paid your ransom in full! For I have bought you for a great price, the price of my Son's life.

You are redeemed from the payment of your sins! Your debt has been paid! You are justified. You are mine. By your faith in Jesus, you have MY Holy Spirit in you. My Spirit dwells in you. He is your helpmate. He is your comforter.

Lift your gaze to where your help comes from.

Lift your gaze to your God.

For I am *your* God.

I have created the heavens and the earth.

I have saved you and redeemed you.

You are saved.

You are mine.



Be encouraged. Your God sees you and holds you during your time of suffering. Perhaps just the confirmation that God loves you is enough. Maybe the truth that he wants to reach out to touch your heart, uphold you, and bless you is all the consolation you need.

Whatever the posture of your heart, know that God is the antidote. He is so near to you, and he wants to give you more of his presence, his love, and his Spirit.

Run to him. Cry out to him. Allow him to envelope you.

He is your Father.

He is more than enough.

He is God.

In fervent prayer for someone I love deeply, I asked God to keep them from danger, evil, and suffering. God replied, “Any difficulty or trial that comes upon them will be used for their good and my glory, to make them more like my Son.” Remembering the source of my strength, I exhaled, “Praise God!”

This is my prayer for you ...

Dear Holy and Perfect God,

Bless those that are reading this right now, oh God. Pour out your Holy Spirit into their hearts. Meet them right where they are. Drench them in your Spirit.

Where there is fear, provide your peace. Where there is strife and bitterness, provide forgiveness. Where there is need of healing, provide supernatural deliverance.

Where there is anger, provide love. Where there is unbelief in how *big* a God you are, provide faith. Where there is frustration and impatience, provide grace. Where there is deception, provide truth. Where there is ignorance, provide wisdom. Where there is confusion, provide discernment. Fill their hearts with your healing balm, completely cover their pain. Allow your Spirit to come into their hearts in a deeper way; minister to their souls

in a way that only *you* can. Help them lift their gaze to you, a holy and perfect God who loves them so much that you gave your only Son's life as payment for their sins so they can be reconciled with you, a holy and perfect God.

Become their God. Become *bigger* in their eyes, *bigger* than their trials.

Lift their gaze to you, oh Lord. Have them fix their eyes on you, oh God.

You are an amazing God. You are our God, our Father, our Kinsman Redeemer, and our *everything*. Have them develop a supernatural love and need of your Word found only in the Holy Bible. Live in them. Dwell in them. Pour out your peace into them. Let the world see your Spirit in them. Mark them with your Spirit as children of a holy God.

In Jesus' precious name, I pray.

Amen.



APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Getting to the Heart of It

“Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. *Is anything too hard for me?*”

~ JEREMIAH 32:27 *emphasis mine*

Reread the verse above. Digest it in your heart: *Nothing is too hard for God* (Jeremiah 32:27). He is abundantly able to bless you. Rest assured that he hears you, knows you, and is working all things out for good (Romans 8:28) despite what it might look or feel like.

Answer these applications questions honestly. Keep them to yourself or share them in a group. Either way, be encouraged. God is for you.

1. To help you turn to God as you process your current or previous trial, difficult situation, and/or season of suffering, write down a few sentences describing your storm.

2. What is the first thing you think about each day when you wake up? God or your trial? Why?

3. What would focusing on God each day instead of your trial look like in your life?

4. Create a daily action plan of at least three things you can do to turn your thoughts to God instead of your trial.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

Deep Waters: *Lift Your Gaze*

5. Do you believe God can give you peace and joy during your time of suffering? Why or why not?

6. What if God chooses *not* to end this season but to continue it. What would your response be? Why?

7. Give three specific examples of how God has been faithful in times past.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

8. List the names of three people whom you can ask to pray for you.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

9. What will you ask them to pray for you?

Prayer Journal

“Ask and it will be given to you; Seek and you will find; Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”

~ MATTHEW 7:7-11 NIV *emphasis mine*

1. Before presenting your prayer requests to God, remind yourself of who God is. List five of God’s attributes that resonate with you (such as all-powerful, all-present, all-knowing, holy, without the confines of time, almighty, majestic, beautiful, etc.).

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____

2. List at least five blessings in your life that you are grateful for.

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____

3. List your prayer requests.

4. Write down anything else the Lord is speaking to your heart.

5. Finally, worship God to remind yourself of what an awesome God he is. And praise him in advance for whatever the outcome.

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To God be all the glory!



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