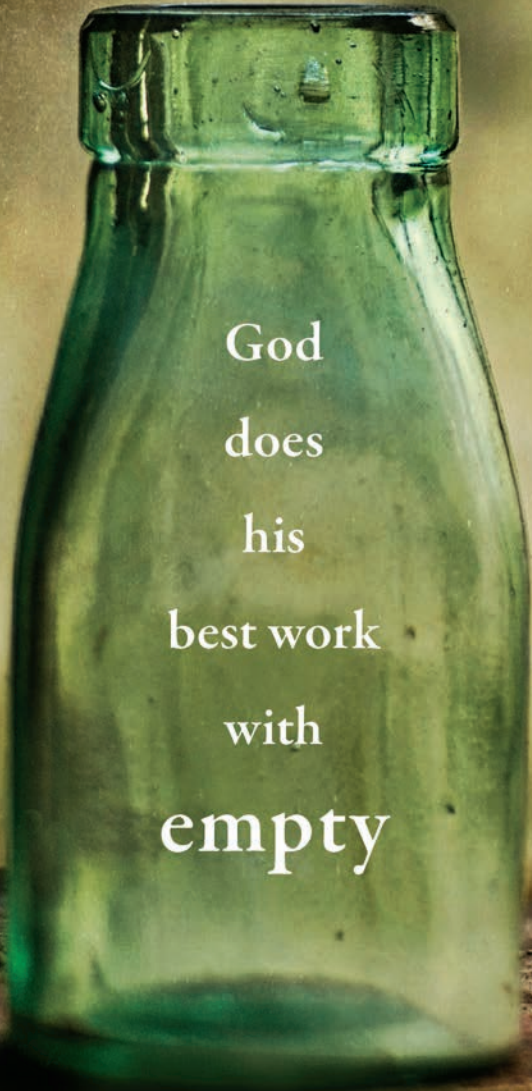


"You must read this book . . . grounded in Scripture  
and filled with tested-and-tried compassion."

JONI EARECKSON TADA

A green glass bottle is the central focus of the image. It is empty and has a simple, rounded shape with a slightly wider base. The bottle is set against a dark, textured background that looks like a wooden surface or a wall. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, giving the scene a somber and contemplative feel. The text is printed in a clean, white, serif font, centered within the bottle's body.

God  
does  
his  
best work  
with  
empty

NANCY GUTHRIE

You *must* read this book. Too many people around you are grieving hard yet are clueless as to how to fill the emptiness. Be warned: This impossibly personal work treads on delicate territory (Who among us is an expert in helping the anguished deal well with loss?). Take heart, though; you have a seasoned, skilled guide in Nancy Guthrie. She has ingested the bitter bread of loss, which makes her counsel wise, wonderful, and best of all, *authentic*. In *God Does His Best Work with Empty*, my treasured friend shares insights that are grounded in Scripture and filled with tested-and-tried-compassion. Best of all, she knows Jesus well and understands how to gently point hurting people his way. So read it. And let its wisdom push you out into a hurting world where only Christ can fill those who are empty.

JONI EARECKSON TADA, Joni and Friends International  
Disability Center

Nancy's writing is like a familiar pair of hands tenderly taking hold of our faces and an empathetic set of eyes, locking with ours to remind us of what has never stopped being true. Her words do the important work of acknowledging our ache, then lifting our gaze to the cross and the hope of eternity it secures for us. This book does that work patiently, thoughtfully, and expertly.

RAECHEL MYERS, cofounder of She Reads Truth

Nancy Guthrie is one of my favorite writers, not least of all because she's saturated with God's Word. She affirms Jesus without ever offering cheap "get-on-with-it" advice that is code for "stop grieving, it makes us uncomfortable." With honesty and transparency, Nancy affirms gospel truth that encourages, corrects, and empowers us to embrace the blood-bought goodness and joy of Jesus. This is a terrific book.

RANDY ALCORN, author of *Heaven, If God is Good*, and *Giving Is the Good Life*

Nancy Guthrie is always a source of sound wisdom for me, and *God Does His Best Work with Empty* is no different. Offering deep sympathy and life-giving hope, this book will strengthen your heart in the weary places and point you to the joy and promise of being filled by Christ.

LAURA WIFLER, cofounder of Risen Motherhood; podcaster; coauthor of *Risen Motherhood: Gospel Hope for Everyday Moments*

I noticed while reading through the Bible one year that God frequently used women's barren, empty wombs to bring timely deliverance to his people. After reading this book, I now know why: God does his best work with empty vessels! In a world of clichés and pat answers to real problems, Nancy Guthrie speaks divine truth, explaining not only *why* God uses emptiness but *how*. Finally—a Scripture-based explanation that causes me first to think, then to worship our ever-filling God! The prayer at the

conclusion of the book is something I personally plan to incorporate in my own journey moving forward. We all experience *empty* somewhere in our lives, and this book has helped me know how to fill it. Thank you, thank you for this biblical solution to emptiness!

DAVID ARTHUR, CEO and President, Precept Ministries

We all want to be skilled in connecting what we feel with what God says. We certainly can feel empty; the challenge is to hear God speak in Scripture to this emptiness and to hear him speak often, with characteristic gentleness and the element of surprise and newness. Nancy is, I think, the perfect person to make those connections for us.

ED WELCH, counselor and senior faculty, CCEF

*Empty* is a feeling we all experience in life. When the well runs dry, how we fill it up makes all the difference in the world. Some turn to alcohol, drugs, and personal ambition to numb the pain of loss and despair. But none of those provide us with what we need most—a *real* solution. In this book you won't find sugary platitudes or shallow pick-me-ups. You will find answers and see what we've all come to expect from Nancy Guthrie. She can relate to you, she can understand you, and she can help you. In your greatest pain, you can find a greater purpose.

COSTI W. HINN, pastor and author of *God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel*



God Does His Best Work with Empty



God  
does  
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best work  
with  
empty

NANCY  
GUTHRIE

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ISBN 978-1-4964-3969-7

Printed in China

26	25	24	23	22	21	20
7	6	5	4	3	2	1



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## INTRODUCTION

“**THAT’S ME!** That’s my life. I feel so empty,” my friend Julie said when I told her the title of the book I was working on, the book you now hold in your hands. She and her husband, both newly retired, their children far away, were struggling to figure out how to fill not just the hours in the day but the holes in their hearts. But her response to the title wasn’t unique. Whenever I told people what I was working on, the most common response was a knowing, low-pitched “Mmmm.”

The reality of emptiness seems to resonate.

I know it resonates with me. And I’m somewhat embarrassed to admit it because my life has been and is now filled with so much goodness. I have a multitude of reasons to be perfectly happy and completely satisfied. And yet . . .

I have often found myself fighting off a sense of

emptiness, or perhaps more accurately, wallowing in a wave of emptiness. Sometimes I feel as if there is a bottomless pit inside of me that no amount of entertainment, affirmation, or accumulation can fill. I'm ashamed of how envious I can be of what someone else has or does when I have so much and get to do so much. I've often wondered how I can feel empty immediately after accomplishing something I've worked hard for or while I'm still on the vacation I've dreamed of. I've wondered how I can feel lonely in a room full of interesting people or in a marriage to a wonderful man. I've wondered how it is that I can so quickly descend from thrilling satisfaction into nagging dissatisfaction after an expensive purchase, a successful event, or a sought-after experience.

But I do.

Of course, nothing has led to a profound sense of emptiness like the losses of two of my children—my daughter, Hope, and later my son, Gabriel, who both died due to a rare metabolic disorder.<sup>1</sup> I remember early on in my grief after Hope's death, driving down Hillsboro Road, looking over at the empty seat beside me and tearfully saying out loud to myself, "There is supposed to be a toddler in a car seat over there. She should be here." But there was just an empty space. In those days I was constantly confronted by an empty

bedroom at our house, an empty place at the table, an empty place in the family photo, and a huge empty place in my plans for my family and for my life. Over the years since then, the shape and size of that emptiness have changed. But it is still there.

Maybe you can relate. Perhaps you've picked up this book because "empty" is the best way you know how to describe the reality of your life.

Perhaps it is emptiness brought about by loss—the loss of a job, the loss of someone you loved, the loss of a sense of purpose or significance. Or perhaps the emptiness in your life is punctuated not by what once was but by what has never been. You've never been able to establish and maintain the kinds of relationships you've longed for. Maybe there has never been a ring on your finger or a child in your home, or you've never had the title by your name that you hoped for or the level of lifestyle you've dreamed of. The dreams that you have often sought to downplay, for fear that somehow saying them out loud would serve to crush them and thereby crush you, seem to be out of range or the realm of possibility now.

Or perhaps you can't pinpoint exactly why it is you have this sense of emptiness. You realize that in comparison with so many others around you, you have it good. Yet your soul harbors a persistent sense

of disappointment and discontent. It sometimes seems as if the lives of nearly everyone around you are full of purpose and meaning, life and love, fun times and future plans, which magnifies the emptiness in your life.

Sometimes your sense of emptiness haunts you as an undefined yet relentless ache. At other times it overwhelms you as an undeniable agony. It is amazing to me how heavy the weight of emptiness can feel, how much room emptiness can take up in our souls, how much pain can be caused by something that isn't even there.

You may have come to see your emptiness as your *greatest problem*, but I hope to convince you that when God sees the emptiness in your life, he sees it

as his *greatest opportunity*. In fact, throughout the chapters of this book, we're going to see that emptiness has never been, and never will be, a problem to God. Rather, we're going to see again and again throughout the story the Bible tells us that God does

---

*God does his best work with empty, as by his Spirit he fills it with himself.*

---

his best work with empty, as by his Spirit he fills it with himself.<sup>2</sup>

This is good news—but I understand that it may not sound good to you. For some of you, this may sound like a spiritual sales pitch for something that doesn't



have the power to make any difference in your day-to-day reality. While there may be some things you want *from* God, perhaps, if you're honest, you're not really interested in getting more *of* God. Perhaps that sounds ethereal, unappealing, or restricting to you. There is something else, someone else you're convinced you must have to fill up the empty place.

Perhaps that's because your view of God and his goodness and what it means to have him at the center of your life has become somehow altered from reality. Perhaps the enemy of your soul, who would love nothing better than to keep you trapped in an echo chamber of emptiness, has convinced you that the suggestion that God could fill your emptiness is a false promise, religious double-talk, or something that, though you might be able to capture it for a moment, simply will not last.

I want you to know at the outset that I have no interest in making false promises or simply filling up some pages with cheer-you-up, convince-you-things-aren't-that-bad, go-out-there-and-enjoy-life, just-take-hold-of-your-destiny motivational mumbo jumbo. I have no five simple steps to getting rid of that nagging emptiness, no self-help formulas for feeling better. And my intention is not to make this book center on my own experiences of emptiness being filled, though I

must tell you that I have experienced the incredible joy of being filled up by Christ in ways I could not have imagined.

I want to let God speak for himself. That's what he does in the Bible—all of it. God speaks. He reveals himself. He calls us to himself. He offers to fill us with himself.

I want to draw back the curtain to look with you into the fullness of all that God is and does in regard to the emptiness inherent to life in this world. I want to turn up the volume on his promises so that you might find them both believable and impossible to avoid. And I want to believe with you that God can and will fill up your emptiness in a way that nothing and no one else can.

We might as well begin at the beginning. The very beginning. The beginning of everything—except God.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters.

GENESIS 1:1-2

Isn't it interesting that as soon as we learn that God created the earth, we also learn that there were three problems with it? It was formless. It was empty. And it was dark.

But it was not without hope. Why? Because “the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

The Spirit of God was hovering or fluttering like a dove over the dark and formless emptiness. It was as if something was about to happen. And sure enough, it did.

Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

GENESIS 1:3

The problem of darkness was eradicated as creation was flooded with light.

Then he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day” and the darkness “night.” . . . Then God said, “Let there be a space between the waters, to separate the waters of the heavens from the waters of the earth.” And that is what happened. . . . God called the space “sky.”

GENESIS 1:4-8

Once again, just by God’s speaking light and sky into being, the problem of formlessness was dealt with.

## GOD DOES HIS BEST WORK WITH EMPTY

God brought order and shape to the environment and the firmament of his creation.

Next he began to deal with the emptiness. We read:

Then God said, “Let the land sprout with vegetation—every sort of seed-bearing plant, and trees that grow seed-bearing fruit.”

GENESIS 1:11

He went on to fill the seas with fish, the skies with birds, and the land with animals. Then he populated the world with human beings made in his own image. God was at work, filling up the emptiness with light and life, beauty and goodness, meaning and relationship.

And this, my friend, is exactly what he wants to do in your life.

As the story of the Bible continues in Genesis, we’re introduced to the couple—Abram and Sarai, later called Abraham and Sarah—through whom God intended to fill up the emptiness of the world with descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the shore. Except there was a problem.

Sarai was unable to become pregnant and had no children.

GENESIS 11:30

It is interesting the way Moses, as the writer of Genesis, seems to emphasize the emptiness of Sarai's womb by expressing the same reality twice: Unable to become pregnant. No children.

But once again, there was hope because God was at work. In fact, he went to work in a way that made it impossible for anyone to miss that he was the one filling the emptiness.

When Sarah overheard God telling Abraham that she was going to give birth to a son, she laughed. It was truly laughable. She was in her nineties and Abraham was one hundred years old. "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" God said (Genesis 18:14). And sure enough, we read, "The LORD kept his word and did for Sarah exactly what he had promised. She became pregnant, and she gave birth to a son for Abraham in his old age. This happened at just the time God had said it would" (Genesis 21:1-2).

What was too hard—in fact, impossible—for Abraham and Sarah to make happen was, in fact, not too hard for God. They named the baby Isaac, which means "laughter." God filled Sarah's empty womb with joy.

Of course, in many ways, it was Sarah's unlikely pregnancy by the power of God that prepared God's people for another unlikely pregnancy years later. What

was startling about this pregnancy was not that the woman was old but that she had never been with a man.

“Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!”

Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.”

The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”

LUKE 1:30-35

Once again the Spirit was hovering, doing his creative work, so that Mary’s empty womb was filled with the very life of God. In the darkness of her womb the one who called himself the Light of the World took shape. Cells generated cells. The Word became flesh and he was full—full of grace and truth.

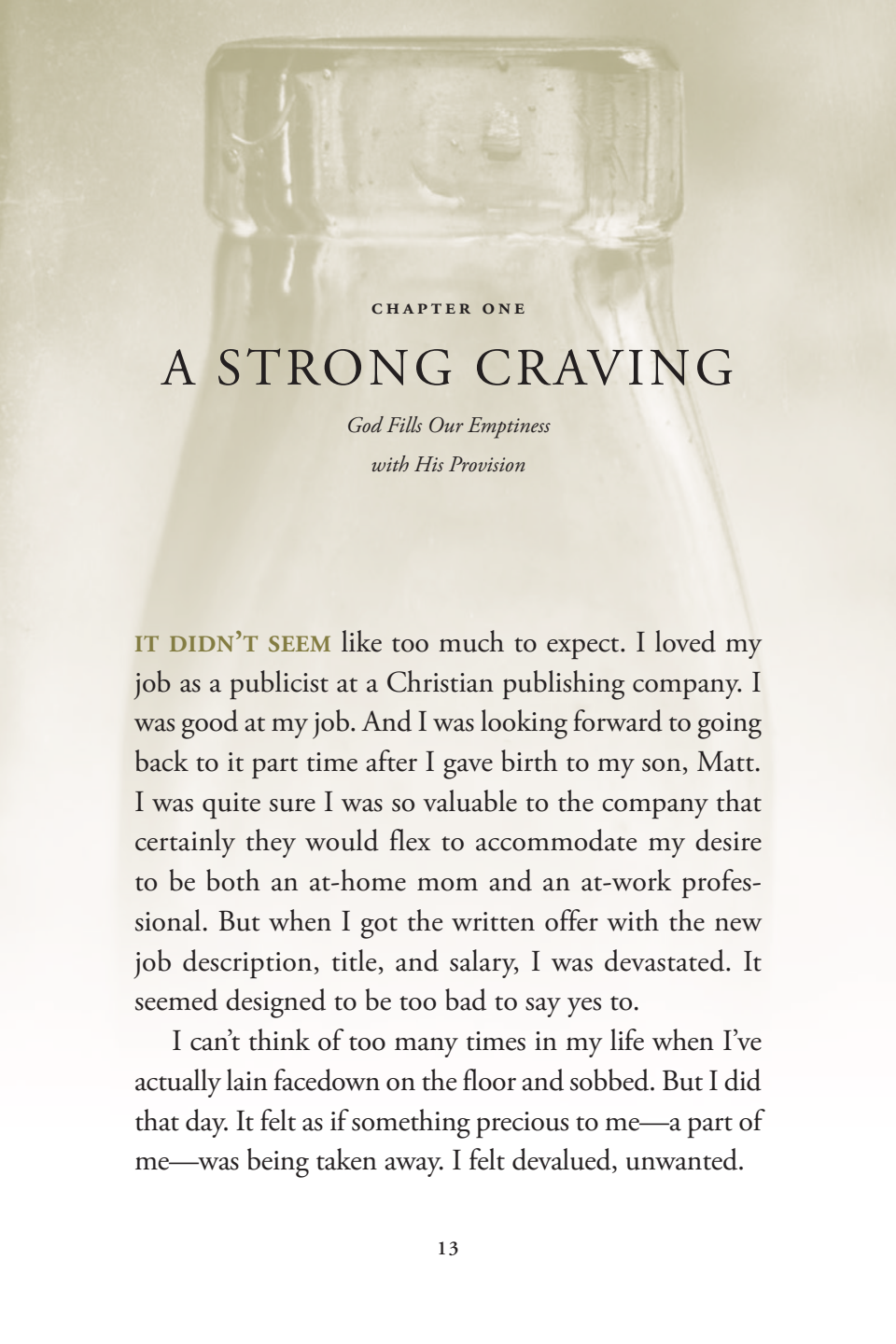
Do you find yourself in need of grace to fill and redeem and relieve the ache of your emptiness? God will

fill your life with the grace that only he can provide. And he loves to give grace. John 1:16 tells us, “For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (ESV).

As you work your way through the pages that follow, my hope and desire is that you will find page after page of grace, page after page of tangible hope that your emptiness can be filled. My prayer is that you’ll begin to believe and experience that, in fact, God really does do his best work with empty as he fills it with himself.







CHAPTER ONE

# A STRONG CRAVING

*God Fills Our Emptiness  
with His Provision*

**IT DIDN'T SEEM** like too much to expect. I loved my job as a publicist at a Christian publishing company. I was good at my job. And I was looking forward to going back to it part time after I gave birth to my son, Matt. I was quite sure I was so valuable to the company that certainly they would flex to accommodate my desire to be both an at-home mom and an at-work professional. But when I got the written offer with the new job description, title, and salary, I was devastated. It seemed designed to be too bad to say yes to.

I can't think of too many times in my life when I've actually lain facedown on the floor and sobbed. But I did that day. It felt as if something precious to me—a part of me—was being taken away. I felt devalued, unwanted.

A short time later, floundering in the adjustments of new motherhood, I remember saying to my husband, David, “I want my old life back. I want my old job back. I want my old body back. I want my old relationship with you back.”

I believed what I was doing at home with Matt was important. But honestly, it just didn't *feel* important. I remember going into the office to clean out my things and finding a message on my desk that one of the publishing company's bestselling authors had called and was asking me to call him back. Now *that* made me feel important.

I had such a strong craving for something that seemed to hold the key to my happiness—being a valued part of that company, that team. And I couldn't imagine how that hunger was ever going to be satisfied by changing diapers and playing on the floor with an infant. I couldn't imagine how I was going to be happy without that work title after my name, that work paycheck being deposited to my account, and that work significance supporting my sense of self.

That craving dominated my life for quite a while, coloring my view of all of the goodness in my life. And I've had plenty of cravings since then, cravings for things that were out of reach, cravings for things I have been unable to make happen. I imagine you have too. We

are creatures of desire. We have wants. And sometimes those wants become cravings—cravings that cause us to lose perspective, cravings so strong that they become the knothole through which we see all of life.

That's how it was for the people of God who were rescued from slavery in Egypt. God rescued them so that they could live with him in his Promised Land, where he pledged to satisfy them with good things. He brought them to the edge of the land he had promised to give them, but they became afraid. They didn't trust him. So they ended up spending forty years in the wilderness. Forty years of in-between time in an inhospitable environment.

But God did not intend for their wilderness years to be wasted years. Rather, he intended to use their time in the wilderness to teach and train them. He intended for them to learn that he could be trusted to provide for his own. Forty years in the wilderness would give them time to live out that belief and depend on him day by day to meet their needs, even if he didn't assuage all of their cravings. There in the wilderness he gave them the opportunity to discover what they really needed more than what they craved.

We read their story of forty years in the wilderness in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. But we shouldn't read it merely as a story about distant,

disconnected people. What we must see is that their story is our story. If God has rescued you from slavery to sin through the blood of an innocent lamb—the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—and if by faith you have taken hold of God’s covenant promises to his people centered in the person of Jesus Christ, then the Israelites’ story is your story too.

Just as God did not intend for their years in the wilderness to be wasted, neither does God intend for the years you and I spend living in the empty wilderness of life in this world to be wasted. Just as he wanted to teach and train the Israelites as they made their way through the wilderness, so he has something he wants to teach you and me, a way he wants to train us.

### Hunger in the Wilderness

It was one month after the people had left Egypt, and evidently the thrill of escape was beginning to wear off.

“If only the LORD had killed us back in Egypt,” they moaned [to Moses]. “There we sat around pots filled with meat and ate all the bread we wanted. But now you have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death.”

EXODUS 16:3

Here's the first hint that their craving was robbing them of perspective. They were forgetting about the beatings, the backbreaking work, and the murder of their infant sons back in Egypt. And what was making them forget? Hunger. Their mouths were watering as they remembered the food they ate back in Egypt. But God, in fact, had not brought them into the wilderness to starve. He intended to provide for them.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Look, I'm going to rain down food from heaven for you. Each day the people can go out and pick up as much food as they need for that day. I will test them in this to see whether or not they will follow my instructions."

EXODUS 16:4

The Israelites were out in the desert where there was no food or water. And why were they there? Because God had led them there. It wasn't an accidental detour but rather a purposeful detour. He intended to test them. In other words, he was giving them the opportunity to live as if they had a relationship with the God of the universe, who was committed to taking care of them—a relationship expressed on their part by their willingness to trust and obey him.

When the dew evaporated, a flaky substance as fine as frost blanketed the ground. The Israelites were puzzled when they saw it. “What is it?” they asked each other. They had no idea what it was.

And Moses told them, “It is the food the LORD has given you to eat.”

EXODUS 16:14-15

The Hebrew word *man hu'*, or *manna*, means, “What is it?” That’s what the Israelites called this miraculous food that was sent to them by God every morning for forty years. “What’s for supper?” someone would ask, and the answer was always “What is it?” The manna was a daily miracle that lasted for forty years.

But it was also a daily test. The people could never store up manna for the next day. Every morning, as they gathered just enough for that day, they had the opportunity to demonstrate that they trusted God to provide for them tomorrow too. They had the opportunity to live by faith.

And really, as we find ourselves living here in the wilderness of the world, we’re put to the same test. In fact, perhaps that is why God has allowed us to experience the emptiness we feel. Perhaps we’re being put to the test. Or another way to look at it is this:

*God is giving us the opportunity to live out what we say we believe.*

God intends to use this time in our lives to train us to trust that he will provide what we need, when we need it. Have you said that the God of the Bible is your God? Here in the wilderness is where you have the opportunity to live that out. As you trust him to supply what you really need and refuse to grumble about his provision, you demonstrate that the faith you claim is genuine and not merely a convenient or culturally acceptable alliance.

We catch up with the Israelites in the book of Numbers. It's about a year later, and we discover that even though they had been waking up to manna delivered outside their tents every morning, they were grumbling again.

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*God intends to use this time in our lives to train us to trust that he will provide what we need, when we need it.*

---

Then the foreign rabble who were traveling with the Israelites began to crave the good things of Egypt. And the people of Israel also began to complain. "Oh, for some meat!" they exclaimed. "We remember the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt. And we had all the

cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic we wanted. But now our appetites are gone. All we ever see is this manna!”

NUMBERS 11:4-6

Ah, so it's not that they had *nothing* to eat. It's that they wanted something to eat other than the manna God rained down on them every day. God was leading them to a land flowing with milk and honey, and feeding them day by day with bread from heaven. (And how do you think bread that is made in heaven tastes? Heavenly, of course!) But their mouths were watering for the leeks and melons back in Egypt.

Often people say that if God would do a miracle, then they would believe in him. Perhaps you think that if God would simply supply what you are hungry for, then you would be more inclined to trust him going forward. You would love him rather than resent him. But the history of Israel is the story of people who experienced miracles on a massive scale, including the daily miracle of manna waiting for them outside their tents, yet did not trust God. They refused to love him with all of their hearts, souls, and strength. Instead of believing in him, they rebelled against him. As Dr. Tuck Bartholomew says, “They became one-dimensional people who thought about life only



through the knothole of their craving.”<sup>3</sup> Their desire for more variety in their diet became a demand that blinded them to anything and everything else. They couldn’t see the goodness of God literally raining down on them because they were consumed by their craving.

Many of us have cravings that blind us so we can’t see all that God has done for us and all he has given to us. Yes, we appreciate salvation and all that, but what we *really* crave is to be thin, to have a nicer house in a better neighborhood, to be elevated to a position with more authority and opportunity, to have a child or to be able to change the child we’ve got.

For the Israelites, everything was about food. What is everything about for you? Are you allowing that craving to be the knothole through which you view all of life, causing you to lose sight of God’s goodness?<sup>4</sup>

Consider what the Israelites were craving: the culinary delights of Egypt. They were entertaining the idea of going back to Egypt, the place that had literally been killing them, all because their food cravings could be satisfied there. They were facing a clear choice: Would they follow their cravings back into the slavery of Egypt, or would they be satisfied for now, accepting and enjoying God’s provision, believing that he would supply their needs, if not all of their cravings, while they lived in this in-between time in the wilderness? Would they

demand that God give them everything they craved in the here and now, or would they allow their hunger to fuel their longing for the day when they would feast with God in the land of milk and honey?

And, of course, we face the same clear choice. God is putting us to the same test.

*He is giving us the opportunity to reject what the world offers as we wait for what is to come.*

The day is coming when the dissatisfaction that is inherent to life in the wilderness will be gone for good.

---

*As we live out our days in the wilderness of the world, we have the opportunity to wean our appetites away from the things the world provides that temporarily satisfy our taste buds but actually rob us of life and freedom.*

---

We'll make our home in God's eternal land, the new heaven and new earth, and we'll never go hungry again. But here and now, as we live out our days in the wilderness of the world, we have the opportunity to wean our appetites away from the things the world provides that temporarily satisfy our taste buds but actually rob us of life and freedom. We have the opportunity to feed on the bread that God provides so that we develop our appetites for what truly nourishes and gives life.

### Developing a New Appetite

The Israelites had forty years to develop their appetites for what would really satisfy them. In fact, when the next generation was preparing to enter into the Promised Land, Moses explained to them that this was exactly why God had allowed his people to experience hunger in the wilderness in the first place.

Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands. Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

DEUTERONOMY 8:2-3

Evidently it wasn't an accident that they went some time without food and felt the discomfort of hunger before God sent the manna. What they perceived as lack or emptiness was actually a gift that would help them learn something. By depending upon God's promise to

provide manna day by day, the Israelites were to learn that “we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

What were the words that come from the mouth of the Lord that they were to live by? God’s promise to give them the land; his promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience; his assurance that the law was for their good always; his instructions for sacrifice and sanctification, feasts, and festivals; and the announcement of his intention to bless the whole world through them.

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*As the Word of God begins to change how we think, we discover that it is also changing how we feel. In fact, we discover that it is actually changing what we want.*

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Of course we have so much more revelation from God than they had. They had the words from God that Moses had delivered to them, but we have the whole of the Bible. So then, what does it mean for you and me to “live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD”? It means that we are meant to consume what God has provided to

us in his Word by reading it and hearing it preached. We have to chew on it. We have to work its nourishment into our system. We have to think! We find ourselves provided for and strengthened as we think

through Scripture's implications and applications and as we figure out what it will look like for us to begin living in light of its truth. And as the Word of God begins to change how we think, we discover that it is also changing how we feel. In fact, we discover that it is actually changing what we want.

For example, we read in the Psalms:

The LORD God is our sun and our shield.

He gives us grace and glory.

The LORD will withhold no good thing  
from those who do what is right.

O LORD of Heaven's Armies,

what joy for those who trust in you.

PSALM 84:11-12

Instead of rushing through the passage or discounting it, we begin to meditate on it and tease out its implications. We think about what it means to have Jesus as the one who shines light into our lives so we can see and grow, and what it means to have him as our shield, protecting us, guarding our lives from the enemy of our souls. We begin to think through the many times we've witnessed God give grace to people who don't deserve it—both people in our lives and those we read about in Scripture—and the times in which he has extended

grace to us over the course of our lives. We consider the ways in which we can testify that it is really true that the Spirit of Christ has been at work in our lives making us more like Christ, the ways in which he is giving his own glory to us.

Further, as we read and linger on the line, “The Lord will withhold no good thing from those who do what is right,” we remember that we read the whole of the Bible through the lens of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We’re comforted in knowing that we can expect that the Lord will withhold no good thing from us, not because we have always done what is right but because Jesus has always done what is right, and when we come to him in faith, he transfers his perfect record of obedience to us. Then we think through what the psalmist might mean by “good thing,” and we let the reality settle in our souls that God knows what is good better than we do. As we mull the words over in our minds, it becomes clearer to us that since the Lord will withhold no good thing from those who do what is right, whatever he has withheld from us is because it would not be best for us, or because now is not the right time for us to have it. We experience joy trusting in the Lord as our provider.

In other words, rather than feeding on our disappointment and frustration, we choose to chew on nourishing truth. Instead of feeding on social media, where

we are bombarded with images of what other people have that has so far been withheld from us, we feed on God's promises of his intentions to do good to us.

So I have to ask you: How's your diet these days? What are you feeding on? Are you allowing your appetite to be developed by the Word of God, or is it mostly shaped by what Egypt has to offer and tells you you must have? God is providing you with an opportunity during these years spent living in the wilderness:

*He is giving you the opportunity to discover what you really need, rather than being consumed by what you crave.*

Oh, how I wish I would have grasped this in those early days of motherhood when I was so consumed by my craving for significance through my job. How I wish I would have had a heart to learn all that God intended to teach me in those wilderness years that seemed so mundane. He was giving me the opportunity to discover that my significance can never really be dependent on a title or a paycheck. It has to come from him. Jesus alone is the only thing I must have in this world to be happy. As I feed on him, I continue to find that he is what I really need.

If you and I feed only on our own thoughts and feelings, we'll grumble and grow resentful. But as we feed on the Word of God, we'll grow in gratitude for all that

God has provided, and we'll grow in anticipation for all that is yet to be provided.

### **Another Test of Hunger in the Wilderness**

We would like to be able to look back at the family history we read about in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and discover that our spiritual ancestors learned what they were meant to learn in the wilderness, that they developed an appetite for God's Word that continued when they moved into the land God provided for them. But they didn't. Instead, when they moved into Canaan, they began to consume all of the idolatry the Canaanites served up to them.

Ultimately, the people of Israel, whom God referred to as his "firstborn son," failed the test of the wilderness. So God sent another Son. And he let this Son experience hunger in the wilderness too.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.

During that time the devil came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread."

But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say,



‘People do not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth  
of God.’”

MATTHEW 4:1-4

God let Jesus hunger in the wilderness, not for forty years, but for forty days. But instead of grumbling, instead of accusing God of bringing him out into the wilderness to let him die, instead of taking it into his own hands to provide for himself, Jesus trusted in God’s provision. Jesus demonstrated that he had spent the previous thirty years of his life feeding on every word that comes from the mouth of God, and it strengthened him for facing hunger in the wilderness with faith that God would provide what he needed.

### **Hunger on the Hillside**

A day came when Jesus found himself in front of a hungry crowd. It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover celebration, the time when the people feasted in celebration of the rescue God had accomplished through Moses centuries before. So Jesus used the timely opportunity to give them a sign about who he is and why he came.

Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks to God, and distributed them to the people. Afterward he did the same with the fish. And they all ate as much as they wanted.

JOHN 6:11

As the people experienced the miracle of provision, they began to think that Jesus was another Moses, that the miracle that took place in the wilderness for forty years was beginning again. So the next day, they got into boats and crossed the Sea of Galilee to get to Capernaum, hopeful that Jesus would repeat the miracle of the previous day.

“Show us a miraculous sign if you want us to believe in you. What can you do? After all, our ancestors ate manna while they journeyed through the wilderness! The Scriptures say, ‘Moses gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, Moses didn’t give you bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven. The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

“Sir,” they said, “give us that bread every day.”

Jesus replied, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again.”

JOHN 6:30-35

The people were correct to relate the miracle that happened in their day to the story of what happened in Moses’ day. But they were missing the point of the miracle. They were missing what the sign was pointing to. Jesus isn’t merely the conduit of God’s promise of bread, as Moses was. Jesus *is* the bread. And Jesus was standing there offering himself to them.

Now what would have made sense at this point was for them to come to him—in fact, run to him. But instead, they did something that sounds very familiar to us, having just read the story of their ancestors—our ancestors—in the wilderness. They grumbled.

[Jesus said,] “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and this bread, which I will offer so the world may live, is my flesh.”

Then the people began arguing with each other about what he meant. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” they asked.

So Jesus said again, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you. But anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise that person at the last day.”

JOHN 6:51-54

At this point, many of those who had been following Jesus turned away and deserted him. They only wanted bread from Jesus, not Jesus as bread. They were thinking that Jesus would be useful in their pursuit of the life they wanted, but they didn't really want *him*. They just wanted what they thought he could give to them.

And when we read this, we can't help but see ourselves in these people. We think life—the good life—will come when Jesus gives us what we want, what we think we need. And just as he did with these people in Capernaum, he presses the issue with us to the point of offense. Jesus stands offering himself to us, and he's asking, “Will you feed on my atoning death as your life? Will you abide in me, feed on me, commune with me? Will you love me? Will you nurture your craving for me rather than insisting on having what you crave?”

Perhaps we're not as immediately dismissive of Jesus' offer of himself as the people were that day in

Capernaum. We may be more polite, yet our attitudes and actions often say, “Jesus, thank you. I respect you and appreciate the offer. But if you really want to be helpful, you would add to my bank account, or add to my family, or add to the estimation others have of me.” And Jesus looks us in the eyes and says, “Don’t you understand? If you don’t feed on me, you will starve to death. But as you feed on me, you take my own unlimited, unstoppable, unending life into yourself.”

What a tragedy it would be for Jesus to supply everything on our wish lists yet leave our deepest need unmet, for him to shower us with what we want yet leave us empty of what we really need.

### **How Will You Feed Your Hunger?**

My friend, I wish I could tell you that God is going to rain down whatever it is that you are so hungry for. I wish I could tell you that he is going to miraculously provide so that you will be filled. There are others who will say that. They’ll tell you that if you have enough faith and pray the right prayer and speak the right words, then you will get your miracle. But we see all over Scripture that that just isn’t true. I cannot tell you that your need is going to be met in the way and timing you are hoping and praying it will be met. No one can.

But what I can tell you is this: If you are hungry, God

is letting you hunger for a good purpose. God is giving you the opportunity to live out what you say you believe. God is strengthening you by forcing you to reckon with the inability of the things of this world to fill you up and their tendency, instead, to enslave you. God is seeking to retrain your appetite toward what you really need, what will truly satisfy and sustain you, what will infuse your life with lasting significance. God is whispering to you, or perhaps shouting to you in your emptiness, “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8).

Are you open to that? Or does that just sound like an empty religious answer that will leave you continuing to crave?

I can think of times when I have felt as if someone were giving me the pat answer, the spiritualized answer that I was certain I saw right through. I was quite sure that I was hearing just another worn-out version of “Get close to God by reading your Bible and praying” that simply would not work. At least I didn’t think it would work for me. And maybe you think that what I’m saying to you right now is just a pat answer that you’ve heard before and that is really no answer at all. Perhaps you think there is no way that something as spiritual-sounding as feeding on Christ day by day, hour by hour, would have any power to address your deep need.

But perhaps that’s because you’ve never really tried

it. Perhaps you've dabbled in it but never truly feasted on him. I wish I could look you in the eyes when I tell you that it is true that as we begin to chew on "every word that comes from the mouth of God"—not just by checking off a daily Bible reading, but by tearing off huge chunks of Scripture to think about, figure out, pray through, and submit to—we find that our cravings don't have as much power over us as they once did. As we make time day by day to simply savor who Jesus is and all he has done, is doing, and will do for us, rather than rushing through a fast-food meal of Netflix, Internet scrolling, and other diversions, we find ourselves tasting and seeing that the Lord is good. It's not that we're not hungry anymore; it's that our appetites are changing. We are discovering that Jesus is not someone we use to get a feast that's to our liking. Rather, Jesus is the feast.

As you feed on his obedient life, you'll lose your appetite for perfection and performance. As you feed on his sacrificial death, you'll be able to enjoy drawing close to God rather than living in fear of being under the judgment of God. And as you feed on his victorious resurrection, anchoring your hopes in the resurrection body that will be given to you, the heavenly inheritance that will be granted to you, and the eternal life that will be extended to you one day, you'll find that you stop

expecting that this world could ever fill you up with its limited offerings. Every time you participate in eating the bread and drinking the cup of the Lord's Supper, rather than rushing through it mindlessly, you'll savor the taste on your tongue, allowing it to fill you with anticipation of the greater feast to come, when the Lord "will spread a wonderful feast for all the people of the world. It will be a delicious banquet with clear, well-aged wine and choice meat" (Isaiah 25:6).

I want and need my appetites to be retrained toward that feast more and more each day. Don't you?

You and I live in a day when high-protein or high-fat diets have made bread the enemy of our weight-management goals. So perhaps when we hear Jesus offer himself as the Bread of Life, we think we'll stick with the low-carb option. But for the Israelites in the wilderness, and for the people in Capernaum, to not have bread to eat was to starve. To say no to bread was not merely to live a diminished life; it was to have no life. The options were to eat this bread or starve to death.

And really, my friend, it is the same for us. We feed on this bread, the person and work of Jesus Christ, or we starve in the wilderness of this world. You see, it is not just that nothing else will fill up our emptiness; it's that nothing else will nourish our souls. Nothing else can provide the life we are so hungry for.