

"A Blessing in the Storm...
Muscular Dystrophy messed up my life
and made me whole"

Volume Three - A Voice Crying in the Wilderness

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*"Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness
and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards,
and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope." Hosea 2:14-15 NIV*

Introduction

"You're a voice crying out in the wilderness," my spiritual mentor said to me. At that moment, memories of Catholic School flooded my mind. Back then I

knew a little about what was in the Bible; however I really had no idea what this wilderness thing was. Didn't they call John the Baptist a voice crying in the wilderness?

Fast forward to my early thirties. Hereditary Spastic Paraplegia—my muscle disease—was starting to manifest its ugly head. All kinds of strange physical limitations were happening to my body. The world I knew was falling apart and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. At that time, I had determined my life was taking a drastic change for the worst. In disarray is an understatement; I was out for the count and seemingly trapped with no way out.

He pulled me out of that miry pit! Mercy found me. He healed my spirit, not my body—not yet anyway! Nothing or no one in my life has grabbed me and pursued my heart like Christ. My loyalties instantly switched from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of Light! I wasn't aware of it, but this is when my long wilderness journey began. Overwhelming desire to really get to know Him consumed me, and I wanted so badly to embrace this new life He had for me.

GOD'S BOOT CAMP... GOD'S INCUBATOR... A BIRTHING GROUND...
A COCOON... OUR CAVE... THE DESERT PLACE... BARREN AND DRY...
DETOUR TO THE PROMISED LAND...

The wilderness is all of the above. It's a season of getting prepared and personally dressed by God in order to walk in the calling He has ordained for you since the foundation of the earth. Being in the wilderness is an intensive time of learning about Jesus, but it's ultimately about souls walking away from you knowing they just had an encounter with Jesus; they will without a doubt know that God has walked in the midst of them. *But it comes at a very high price.*

The wilderness is a time of purification from the world's systems. It's a time of intense spiritual preparation and inner-healing. The Holy Spirit transforms you from the inside out; He allows your old foundation to crumble and be destroyed in order to show you how spiritually bankrupt you really are. He

builds a new foundation in you that will not be destroyed by anything. This new foundation is constructed on nothing but Jesus Christ. Everything and I mean everything (career, health, church-life, marriage, finances, your sanity, etc.) in your life will be shaken. Whatever remains will only be what is part of His plan for your new life.

So in this third volume I will tell about my wilderness experience thus far. I will give examples of some of the thorns in my flesh, the constant struggle to give up - to give it ALL to Christ, the lessons of growth and maturity here in my cave, and finally... surrender. The treasures of darkness that have been imparted to me are amazing.

One of these amazing treasures God has given me is a special friend, who is a huge blessing. Nancy Porambo and I are soul mates, like David and Jonathan. I met Nancy at the support group for chronic illness I used to hold. My chronic illness is visible; anyone can see I have a muscle disease. However, Nancy has an invisible chronic illness. The first thing Nancy said to me when we met was, "Why is this happening to me? I am a good girl." Nancy has agreed to share some of her own wilderness experiences and feelings. Here are her opening words to you...

I was always a good girl. I loved Jesus from the time I was a very little child. I was always in church, Sunday school, and Youth Group. I taught all of the above. I loved Jesus. I loved church. I loved God's people. I loved the word, and I loved studying the word. I did everything that I thought God wanted me to do. I was a good wife. I was a great mom. I was a good friend. I gave to others. I am rather selfless.

However, in October 2006 days after walking a half marathon, I was stricken by an allergic reaction to an overheated laminating machine (petrochemical). My body was careening out of control. I was weak and had great difficulty breathing. Doctors could not understand what was happening to me. I lost my job. I lost my friends. I lost my family as I once knew it. I lost my life; something like Dorothy and the tornado from the Wizard of Oz—everything around me was spinning, and I was really too ill to even understand it. I woke up to find myself in the wilderness with a disease they call Scleroderma.

God Almighty has taught us very, very well. We've been enrolled in the University of the Holy Ghost, and are still in school. The man who is greatly used by God is always greatly broken, and greatly prepared. We must remember that one day God will totally redeem suffering; for Nancy and I He kind of did that, not totally, but He has given us the authority to speak from experience...

*"Then he sent someone to Egypt ahead of them—
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.
They bruised his feet with fetters
and placed his neck in an iron collar.
Until the time came to fulfill his dreams,
the LORD tested Joseph's character.
Then Pharaoh sent for him and set him free;
the ruler of the nation opened his prison door.
Joseph was put in charge of all the king's household;
he became ruler over all the king's possessions.
He could instruct the king's aides as he pleased
and teach the king's advisers." Psalm 105: 17-22 NIV*

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Chapter One – Laying the Groundwork

Any responsible parent would never think to give their small child a chainsaw to play with. In the same manner, God needs to grow us up and He needs to trust us totally before we can be placed in the position of whatever He has called us to. If we're not fully ready, we can do a lot of damage to ourselves and those around us - just like that child with a chainsaw. Whatever treasure He has for us cannot be put into the hands of untested vessels that have unformed character. On our own, none of us come close to having the strength of character to represent Christ to a lost and dying world, until Christ forms Himself in us.

Before we are placed in our life's roll, we must be prepared for that which awaits us. There cannot be as so much of a hint of self-centered pride or self-exaltation. This doesn't happen until we have been broken and come to the end of ourselves. Most of the time our life is shut down on the outside because God is performing spiritual surgery on the inner man, and because that change is so vital to enabling us to walk in our calling, God takes away all things that can be distractions to this work; a lot of our possessions, and even people, can easily be turned into idols. God demands your full attention! What I mean by that is you are no longer able to get or have the things other people get or have so easily. He takes you out of your Egypt—the way that you determine in your heart life should be. And in turn, He reforms you. It seems very cruel and unfair to have all of your earthly comforts and your normal ability to manage your life removed. We are stripped and made to feel the shame of our nakedness. But it's really a severe mercy. God wants us to focus on learning from Him, and sometimes uses ways we think are cruel and harsh to call us to where He wants us to be. His heart is not cruel, but kind. What He's after is growth of character and faith.

He wants to be the only source of everything in our lives. We need to understand that He is in control of everything concerning us. We must be certain that He is our only provider and not anyone or anything in the world can satisfy us more than Him. We come to discover that if we don't love God above all, we are truly not worthy to be His disciple. The wilderness teaches you to be free of your fear of man and need for approval. When we totally surrender our heart to God, that's when He knows nothing else can take His place. The truth of James 4:4 echoes with confidence in our soul...

"Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." NKJV

I think the best way to tackle this subject of wilderness is to expound from experience. I've come to understand that God's method is usually to give a vision or a dream first, but all hell usually breaks loose before the fulfillment of the dream occurs! Let us remind ourselves of the story of Joseph, and recall the story of his preparation in the wilderness.

Joseph often tended his father's flocks with his half-brothers. He was their father's favorite because Joseph was the son of Jacob's old age, and that partiality separated him from the rest of his brothers. He was not only the favorite son, but the Bible says that he reported to his father some of the bad things his brothers were doing. As a result, he was the object of envy and hatred amongst his brothers. They couldn't even say a kind word to him.

The time came when God gave Joseph two dreams. Both dreams implied that he would become a great leader who would have authority over his brothers. The Bible says he promptly reported the details of those dreams to his brothers, and that caused them to hate him even more!

In a few days marks the fourteenth year I've been here in the wilderness. Let me tell you why I am and have always been drawn to the story of Joseph, by drawing some comparisons. Just like God gave Joseph dreams about his future, let me tell you about a vision God gave me many years ago. I believe God gave me this vision/promise to anchor my faith during the years life would get really tough. I tell you the truth when I say that hearing these words from God and hiding them in my heart, are the only thing that has kept me going all these years. On the particular night the vision came, my heart was so very heavy with the panic and depression of this disease choking out the very life in me. Lying in bed that night, I gazed into the skylight above our bed and could only see one bright star...

"I am that bright star," God whispered to my heart. At that moment dark clouds came across the skylight and completely covered the star. The sky was totally dark. "Your trials are going to be as thick as these clouds, making it impossible to see me, BUT I AM STILL THERE." The clouds then rolled away and I could see the star again. He then told me, "Just as these clouds dissipated, yours will too."

"Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope. My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life." Psalm 119:49-50 NIV

What you are about to read is the beginning of Nancy's medical mystery tour. You will see once more that just one word from God makes everything well with your soul...

When I first became ill, I was very-very ill. I was hospitalized for several days and all of the tests were inconclusive. I visited Cardiologists, Pulmonologists, Rheumatologists, and they all agreed that there was something wrong with me, but they did not know what it was. I ended up at the University of Penn seeing the top Pulmonologist there. After several visits and many tests he said to me, "Nancy, there is something wrong with you and I don't know what it is". It was then that I cried. I cried and I couldn't stop.

Up until this point I had the peace that passes understanding. I knew that I looked very ill, refusing to look at myself in the mirror. I could tell by the way that friends and family looked at me that they were very concerned. I was growing weaker and thought that I was going to die. I was sleeping a lot. I was not able to walk up a flight of steps without great difficulty and my breathing would stop. I could not shower. I was not able to walk to the mailbox to get my mail. I had no breath, and I continued to weaken. One day ever so clearly the Lord gave me Psalm 118:17...

"I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done." NIV

At the same time a good friend visited because I had e-mailed and told her that I had a chapter for the book she was writing. Karen visited that day. We shared many concerns and it led to me seeing a holistic doctor. I praise and thank God for Karen and for Dr. Schmidt. Dr. Schmidt was extremely concerned about me. He listened very closely to all that had happened. He poured over my test results. He asked me millions of

questions and listened for the answers. Together we plodded along visit after visit.

Finally, Dr. Schmidt told me that I have Scleroderma. The diagnosis of Scleroderma was bigger than me. I read about it. I did all of the research and I didn't know WHAT was going to happen to me. One night during the night the Lord woke me and said, "You have Scleroderma, but you have Jesus." It was then I knew that I was going to be alright. My life as I once knew it was amputated. BUT God was in control. God had a plan. God was going to hold my right hand and walk me through all of this.

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Joseph was just a teenager when his adversity began. He was thrown into a pit by his brothers, and then sold to Midianite slave traders. He was taken to Egypt and was then sold as a house servant to Potiphar, who was an official of the Pharaoh, captain of the guard. Because the LORD was with Joseph, whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper. Potiphar saw that Joseph undoubtedly had the favor of God, so Potiphar made him overseer of his house, and all that he had was put under Joseph's authority. The LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake.

The Bible tells us that Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph, but he resisted her brazen attempt at seduction because he was a godly man and had integrity. Potiphar's wife was outraged, and falsely accused Joseph of rape. After Potiphar had gotten report of this, he took Joseph and put him into the dungeon, a place where the king's prisoners were confined. So you can say that poor Joseph found himself up to his neck in adversity! But Joseph prospers, even in the dungeon. God gave Joseph favor with the jailer, and he put Joseph in charge of all the other prisoners and over everything happening in the dungeon.

God gave Joseph the ability to interpret dreams, and because of that gift he was able to interpret the dreams of two of Pharaoh's officers; the chief butler and the chief baker. Because they both terribly offended Pharaoh in some way, they were thrown in prison, the same dungeon where Joseph was

confined. They remained there for quite some time and Joseph was assigned to take care of them. When interpreting his dream, Joseph told the butler that it meant Pharaoh would take him out of the dungeon and return him to the position of chief butler. The Bible tells us that Joseph then told the butler,

"But remember me when it is well with you, and please show kindness to me; make mention of me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house. For indeed I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews; and also I have done nothing here that they should put me into the dungeon." Genesis 40:14-15 NKJV

The dreams came to pass exactly according to Joseph's interpretations. The butler was reinstated, but forgot all about Joseph and never gave him a second thought. Joseph rotted in jail for two more years. Two whole years!

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*"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a dream fulfilled is a tree of life."
Proverbs 13:12 NLT*

Just imagine Joseph's elation at the butler's release. He probably thought he had a really good chance of getting out of that dungeon, and I'm sure he got his hopes up, only to be forgotten! Through this, God was waiting for Joseph to totally surrender his dreams to Him. From being disappointed time after time, Joseph finally turned from hoping in man and no longer looked for any earthly help. He learned to trust in God only. He painstakingly learned that the temporal things are not to be depended upon. That's a hard thing for us to really absorb!

My hope has been dashed time-after-time. Let me just share some of these times with you. I think you'll try anything when you're desperate enough!

A few years ago, I read about braces that promised better balance and stability for walking (my balance is so bad, I literally have none). Actually the man who made these braces painted a very positive picture of sunny days and miracles. I couldn't wait to have them, and was so hopeful. I took

the matter into my own hands and wasted no time getting them casted and measured specifically for me. To make a long story short, my husband and I commuted to Baltimore at least five or six times, each trip about 300 miles, only to get them and discover how ridiculous they actually were! Needless to say, I had a pity-party and felt sorry for myself. I later threw them in my closet along with all the other gadgets that didn't work.

Note about self-pity... satan is standing behind you laughing scornfully when you complain and pity yourself. Complaining gives a foothold to the devil. For now he has attained his goal, you have fallen prey to an idol, your own ego!

I have a Baclofen Pump for my severe spasticity (spasticity is just like it sounds; its rigidity and tightness in the muscles, with the added perk of involuntary muscle spasms. Walking is impossible with severe spasticity). It's a pump that is surgically implanted below the abdomen. There is a thin, flexible catheter that delivers a constant stream of Baclofen (a muscle relaxer) to the area around my spine that controls my legs. Anyway, I had high hopes again because I was led to believe things were going to be so much better with this pump, I'd be able to climb mountains! Fourteen years later, I still can't even put one foot in front of the other because my legs are too heavy. It feels like I have buckets of cement on my feet.

"Could this weight vest be the answer?" My hope has been deferred too many times to count and I refused to strive anymore. I resolved to let God be in control, and whatever works-works, and vice-versa. The weight vest did help my balance. I could actually stand still more easily, but as soon as I moved... forget it! I still can't lift my feet.

And there are many, many, more medical/physical false-starts.

God will often times let things die; He will let a situation get utterly impossible in the natural because when He steps in and does a miracle, there is not anything or anyone who can take credit but Him! God shares His glory with nobody. Think about that... He let Lazarus die before He raised him back to life, and as a result many believed in Him! Many false starts and many deaths to a vision really has a way of hammering this truth home. As I write this, these words are screaming... *Don't believe the hype, only trust God!* He knows what He's doing.

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." John 11:4 NIV

As far as spiritual dead-ends are concerned, several years ago I started a Christian support group for people with chronic illness. I was ministering to some women, but after a little while the group just mysteriously dwindled away. The support group was resurrected a few times, and I really thought each time would be the time the group would explode! But I was wrong. I've also had the chance to speak at a few churches about God's sovereignty in the midst of chronic illness/disability. Again, this is where I was thinking God would surely use me to speak about the relationship of Him and adversity. I was wrong again. He obviously has another idea for me somewhere down the line. Having your hope deferred is a constant reminder that only heaven can satisfy – not this present world.

It seems that the things that work for others never work for me. My friend Nancy says that she and I are two zebras in a herd of cows! Funny but true. Pathetic.

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Chapter Two – Tried by the Word

Earlier I said that before the fulfillment of the dream occurs, all hell breaks loose! How true, beloved, how true. When God is training you for a higher position/role, it seems everything in your life goes under His refining fire, and whatever isn't burnt up will only be what is part of His new plan for your life. I'm always thinking back to how God first gave Joseph dreams, and then we see all the adversity that he went through before the realization of those dreams. It was natural for a boy of seventeen to be pleased and very prideful with the thought of power and superiority. I'm imagining the pride and arrogance of this young boy when he gave the details of his dreams, and how he told everyone in his family they were bowing down to him. No wonder jealousy and hatred got the best of them!

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I'm not the same girl I was a year ago. Heck, I'm not the same girl I was six months ago. There's has definitely been a consistent change in my character over these wilderness years. Through humiliation—I've eaten a lot of humble pie, heartache, and disappointment, God's refining fire has burned. It burned the arrogant, materialistic, and self-serving girl away. I now understand that every single trial and tribulation was only allowed in my life to teach me and to humble me so that I would have compassion toward others with this similar problem or just have compassion in general. Our trials drive us deeper and deeper into His heart. We learn to seek His face and press even more into Him.

Somehow God balanced me out. What I mean by that is He has built spiritual toughness in me. He has given me a clearer understanding of what His Kingdom is about. He's shown me that the ways of this world and the things that people pursue in life are not as relevant or important as I had once believed. I'm about my Father's Business, and hate being bothered with foolishness.

Hear me out... there is nothing in this world so delightful as the light of God's countenance when all is dark!

Like the many times I have fallen; I'm talking about literally falling on the floor! Just simple things like transferring from my wheelchair to another chair, or taking a tumble when using the bathroom, simply because of being groggy after waking up from a sound sleep. Or not even actually being able to sleep, because for some reason the muscle relaxers I took before I went to bed worked the opposite way they were supposed to work; instead of relaxing and putting me to sleep, I was wide awake and my legs start going into spasms radiating from my legs into my back.

It's times like these that make one question God. These are the times that try your soul.

We need to really think on the account of Joseph's life and realize that it's not just a mere story, but a story teaching us of a broken, deeply wounded man. Give some thought about how you and I feel when we lose things we hold dear. Think of the many fond memories he must of had of his Father and his life in Canaan. Consider Joseph repeatedly rehearsing in his mind how the acts of his cruel brothers set his whole heartbreaking journey into motion. Some of you know how painful it is to have that same terrifying movie playing over and over in your mind! Imagine how his thoughts must have harassed him. His life was spiraling out of control. Can you just imagine all of the sinister voices whispering death and dying in his ears? He was a teenage boy with his whole life ahead of him. He had many of his own hopes and plans for his future, but his plans weren't God's plans. Joseph's character needed to be matured. His juvenile ego had to be toned down in order for him to fulfil God's calling on his life.

When Joseph was put in prison and his feet were made fast with fetters, the Bible says he was so exceedingly troubled that iron surrounded his soul. Can you visualize poor Joseph at that very moment... alone in the darkness, his limbs fretted with chains, and no one to speak to? Can you see why iron surrounded his soul? He lost everything he held dear. He didn't understand why any of this was happening! Just imagine that scene! But the strength of iron is exactly what he needed to fulfill God's purpose in his life, which was to preserve the nation of Israel. God's plan was to give Joseph power. But God first had to teach him to *bear* that power; a rare attainment. The most dangerous thing in the world is to step suddenly from obscurity into power...

"Fire tests the purity of silver and gold, but a person is tested by being praised." Proverb 27: 21 NLT

The words God spoke into his heart in his earlier years concerning his elevated place of honor above his brothers were the words that were always before him. It had to have been extremely difficult for him to endure life in the dungeon, yet he held onto God's Words, despite all the chaos and impossibility. His soul was tried. His soul was severely tried.

Learn from Joseph is the message that continually echoes in my heart and soul. God can lift our head anywhere life takes us. The story of Joseph illustrates that it really is all about God's timing and plans, not ours. It's arrogance and pride that makes us think otherwise.

It's so hard to see day after day, month after month, and year after year go by without deliverance. Oh, the pain of loneliness and isolation associated with living in my cave... the pain of an altered life plan... the uncertainties... what I want to do vs. what actually happens... being tried by His word... but here's the key...

Never doubt in the darkness what God told you in the light.

Imagine how Joseph's mind must have tortured him. "That voice you thought you heard in your heart, was it not just your overactive imagination? Has God ever spoken to you at all? Those dreams you've had, were they not childish? This providence of God which has prospered you wherever you have gone, isn't it not, after all good luck?" I can take a stab in the dark and say that God ceased to speak to him. Yes, He most likely was silent. While Joseph was crying out for Him, it probably seemed that God was nowhere to be found; a deafening silence from the throne of God. I can say that because this exact thing happens to us!

While Joseph's trembling heart and mind were entertaining those thoughts, fear also must have come in and said "How is it possible that your brothers are going to ever honor and respect you when you are so far away? They don't even know if you're alive. Your father believes you are dead. You're a loser. You're here in this dungeon without any hope of freedom. Potiphar sent you here to die." Then the Word of God would say to him, "Can you believe me? Can you trust that I have everything under control? Can you trust that I will fulfill my promises?" The Word had come to Joseph, and it severely tested his trust and commitment.

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I simply cannot think of anything else that can try a person as much as being in a humanly impossible situation where you're required to wait on God. Without a doubt, it has been in this time of waiting, loneliness,

weakness, humiliation (the list goes on), that complete trust, patience and faith in God have been built; not during the times of ease. But When you're tried like this, there's a certain sweetness that comes with love, patience, increased faith and spiritual toughness. He learned that God could be with him in a dungeon!

So is God testing us when He is silent, when there are times of isolation in our lives? We have to rely on what the Bible says, and it tells us He pulls away from us to test what's really in our hearts.

"... God withdrew from him, in order to test him that He might know all that was in his heart." 2 Chronicles 32: 31 NKJV

Here are a few words about God's silence from Nancy...

God has been verbally silent the past years of my illness. There were times when I would be screaming out asking God to please speak to me. I would cry. I would sob. I would scream again. I would cry myself to sleep. I fought depression. I fought anger and bitterness. I was very mad, and didn't understand. I really wanted God to answer me.

BUT listening to powerful Holy Spirit filled pastors and speakers; I learned that God speaks all of the time. He speaks through other Christians, through His Word, and He speaks to us through our circumstances. I started paying closer attention, and started to listen very closely to godly friends. What did they have to say? It was quite different from what the world was blasting at me. I started being in the Word all of the time. I started **STANDING** on the promises of God. I started to talk back to satan when he would tell me that God has left me behind. I am trusting God. I know He would never leave me or forsake me. I know He has a plan. I don't know what the plan is and I do still question, but I believe. I believe that God is in control.

Chapter Three – He Has Made Me Fruitful

*"He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and **concealed me in his quiver.**" Isaiah 49:2 NIV*

God is in the business of preparing modern—day Josephs. When He puts them on the scene or when He reaches for them out of *His quiver*, the world usually wonders where they came from. There are some of us, that when we are placed in the shadow of God's hand, we flourish! Let me share with you a few ways in which God has made me fruitful in this wilderness time of mine...

"The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering." Genesis 41:52 NIV

Day by day and without fail, I'm finding everything I need—the bare necessities—and boy, do I mean bare! Oh wow, it has been through this wilderness that I have seen and learned ("I know" vs. "I have learned") that God controls and governs all things in this world. I trust Him with my life. I trust Him with my future. I can trust Him with all things. It's a mind blowing reality—it really is—when you realize God is all you need. He's all we need! I can now truly fly above my circumstances with Christ!

Let me share with you some pretty cool things that has happened over these wilderness years, while in this cave of mine. The first thing is that God has turned me into a computer nerd/geek! I remember it all started years ago when my husband sat me down at the computer and signed me up with a Blogger account. This was around the same time I was waiting for my first book to get published. I had a publisher keep telling me they were definitely going to publish it, but kept delaying the publishing date. I had just started my writing career, and couldn't wait to tell the world my story of how God has been magnified in my life. The waiting to get my book published was very frustrating to say the least. Even though it only took a month or so to

write the first volume of my memoir, the finished manuscript of my memoir sat for over a year.

I started to blog, and that made me realize that I didn't have to wait for a publisher to get my book out to the world. I could publish an eBook and people could read my memoir instantly. So that's what I did. I got feedback from people not just in the United States, but other countries! Right then and there is when I fell in love with writing, blogging, and the world wide web. But that was only the beginning.

Ever since I can remember, I've always liked reorganizing and redecorating. I love altering and switching things around. I love the idea of change in my surroundings... a new look... how I could improve something. I found it so invigorating to rearrange the furniture—lol! I was always rearranging the furniture! Well I can't physically do that anymore, but I've learned how to design and redesign websites! I started out with learning the ins and outs of simple blog design, and after staying up to the wee hours of many nights... a nerd was born! I think I've learned almost all the computer things I know through trial and error. It seems that trial and error is the only way this hardhead learns *anything*.

And you know what the best part is? I'm using my geek—hood for God's glory! I've been able to help many of my brothers and sisters, whether it's showing them how to do something on their computer, starting a website for them, or redesigning one. That's exciting to me. And God knows. He's the one who downloaded a little of His creativity and wired me with the love of making beautiful things online.

But before I had any idea that God was behind me learning all of this computer jargon, I had my doubts. I remember a few years back, and Nancy can tell you, I was sitting and telling her that I was wasting so much of my time on my computer. I kind of complained. I didn't understand why I was so meticulous with designing my blog; I mean, that I would stay up to whatever time it took me to fix a line somewhere in a background or redo a graphic that wasn't perfect. I wanted to fix it, even though I was probably the only person who saw it. Something that didn't look perfect in my blog's background just bothered me. I can't explain it, but I love it. When I first got into learning how to change my blog's background and theme, I had a

few different blog looks per day! It really is a passion. But after more than a few years, now I see that God had a plan all along, and I think the best is yet to come. No, I am certain that the best is yet to come! So with all of this, how can I not trust Him with everything else?

In this wilderness season, God has proven Himself faithful to me time after time. First let me take you back to when I was using a walker. I was so limited in everything; meaning I would walk just twenty or thirty steps and my body was done! Done for the day! For the most part of this wilderness, it has been like that. I truly was able to do almost nothing. For the past six or seven years I have been totally homebound! I would always be crying to God and asking Him why He even had me to marry. With the exception of my first year of marriage, I couldn't do much of anything, anything a wife did—taking care of the house, cooking, having children, etc.

God has made me appreciate the little things most of us take for granted.

Last year I got an electric wheelchair. It has been something I so desperately needed, and I count it as one of my greatest blessings; only second to my salvation—I'm serious! I use it for everything. I can do things, AND SPEND TIME DOING THINGS like I used to when I was healthier. I praise God for that! I never, ever, would have thought I would be so thankful for A WHEELCHAIR! But I am. It has given me more independence, something I used to have my fair share of. I was always on the move in my healthier days. BUT, I never gave God a second thought. I was too busy grabbing my life by the tail...

Oh my goodness, I see why this disease happened. First and foremost, it was because of the mercy of God. *That's right.* It was because of the mercy of God. He laid me flat out to get my attention because it truly was a matter of life and death. It's been a long ride. Through this wilderness journey, God has shown me how spiritually bankrupt I am without Him. Priceless. He restored me and loved me through the pain, and we grew closer together. Many others can testify to that same love of God; how He can take someone who doesn't recognize their need for Him, how they are not even aware they are serving the devil and his kingdom... and take the scales off of that person's eyes, and set them on fire to where everything in them displays Jesus! What a miracle.

God's ways are indeed mysterious. He has a way of bringing out the best in us. It's only He who sees what diamonds in the rough can become. Think about this... pressure destroys many things, but it's the perfect amount of pressure that makes exquisite diamonds. Let's hear how Nancy has bared some fruit of her own...

What has the Lord done to make me fruitful during this time in the wilderness?

That is a difficult question. It took me a long time to see "fruit." I was so consumed with all that I had lost; it was difficult to see that there was new fruit growing.

My entire life I had been focused on children. I love children. I enjoy being with them, playing with them, teaching them, mentoring them, etc. It was always children. I never cared too much for the elderly. I never even wanted to touch them. BUT now I am older myself. I am in a season of wilderness and my life is changing.

The Lord has placed one after another. He has placed me with the sick, the ailing, and the dying. He has given me the ability, compassion, love, and peace to sit with these friends and family members. The ability to touch them. The ability to listen to them. The ability to pray for them. The humor to encourage them. The patience to watch as they decline. The Lord has brought to the forefront a part of me that I never knew was there.

Over and over I would tell my dear friend, Gloria, that I was not a nurse. She had a colostomy and a urostomy. I would need to help her with those. The smell would upset my stomach. The sight of the colostomy hole in her would repulse me. BUT there was a job to be done. I would pray for the Lord to strengthen me and guide me. Gloria and I would end up laughing and somehow we got through the ordeal. That my friends, was not me. That was totally the Lord. Every visit to Gloria's I would pray that the Lord would help me. And every time when I would leave Gloria's house, I would thank the Lord and tell HIM that HE had done it again. I am not a nurse. I never wanted to be a nurse, but I was doing what any nurse could do. For that I am very thankful.

Then there was my dear friend, Bonnie. Bonnie and I had walked every morning at 5 a.m. for twelve years. You get to do a lot of walking and talking over twelve years. Bonnie was one of my dearest friends. Bonnie

had cancer for the third time. It was really very serious and Bonnie requested me. She wanted me. She wanted me to sit with her. She wanted me to help her take care of a lot of "details." She wanted me to tell the family the severity of her health. She wanted me to sit quietly with her. She told me that she felt very peaceful when I was with her. She wanted me the day that hospice came to set things up. That was not me either. God gave me the ability to do all that Bonnie needed. It was hard for me. I loved Bonnie deeply and I really did not want to lose her. I cried and cried. I still cry, but I am so thankful that the wilderness gave me the time and the ability to be with her until the end.

For another friend I was able to do the family laundry as she was dying from brain cancer.

For another friend I was able to drive him home from chemotherapy treatment. We were able to laugh together. It was a little bit of joy. I was able to make him some tapioca pudding.

Friends, it's the little things. The wilderness has given me the little things. I am able to see the deepest needs of others. I am able to do little things. I am able to do little things with the love of Jesus.

This experience has robbed me of much that I knew and loved, yet it has given me a depth of love and concern that I never would have known otherwise. For that I am eternally grateful.

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Chapter Four – Grace and Courage Under Pressure

Throughout his entire journey, the Bible records that God was with Joseph every step of the way. So He is with us as we walk through our wilderness. Even though he had no understanding of why things were so tough and sorrowful, Joseph shows us courage and accepts his situations gracefully and finds favor in God's eyes. This is how God would like for us to respond in our wilderness. Yes, we may first go through a time of kicking and screaming, letting outer circumstances dictate the way we should feel and respond. But don't fear the wilderness, for it's here you'll be able to fine tune your ear to God's voice. It is here you will have all of the idols in your life removed. It

is here that you will truly experience the reality of a living God like never before. When God takes us into the wilderness, He always shows us that we have way too much of *us* and not enough of Jesus and the cross. Isn't it so amazing when scripture comes alive in our lives? This is exactly what I can now say...

"But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content." Psalm 131:2 NIV

Praise God! No more complaining, I'm done with that. God knows how urgent my situation is. He knows how I feel about things I've lost, and how important they are to me. I don't have to keep rehearsing it over and over to Him. Dear friends, whenever we stress over a matter, get angry over a daily circumstance, or seek to have our own way—it is a sign that our flesh still has some life and needs to die. We must learn to surrender and stop striving against what God has placed in our lives. The verse in this particular psalm speaks of contentment; as a child weaned by his mother, we must still the pride that tends to rise in us. And isn't pride the thing that always gets in the way? Let's remember that pride comes before the fall. God's purpose is to bring us to a place of nothingness so we depend only on Him. Our ego must either die or submit. Rather than rant against our situation, He wants us to make the best of our situations and rely on Him to care for us.

Here was another opportunity for resentment and bitterness to form, but Joseph didn't let them take root. He continued in his faith and waited on God. It's difficult to keep focused on God when you feel passed over, overlooked or unappreciated. The evidence of Joseph's courage is in his behavior, doing right even when He was wronged. He learned to wait patiently on God and to look to God for everything. It takes tremendous courage to look away from circumstances and look instead to God. A good part of faith is having the courage to believe in the goodness of God despite all that we see.

Wow, talk about life passing you by. Every day I am forced to sit on the sidelines. There have been too many times to count when I've been unable to attend certain functions because those places were not handicap accessible. The only times I seem to get out are for doctor appointments.

God has set me aside in my cave—God’s cave of incubation. I really-really understand that my true family is not by blood, but of those who obey and do the will of God. I thank God for the internet! I’ve had the best seat in the house for watching videos of Holy Spirit filled sermons and teachings. He has brought whatever He wanted to teach me right before my eyes and to my fingertips—my keyboard. He’s done all this by taking things and people away that could distract me. Now I can see that! He has brought me together with fellow followers of Christ. We speak the same language. He has brought many of us who are in the wilderness together. We can share much because we have much in common. That alone is so refreshing!

**Just a side note...* As I write this I’m thinking of when David was a shepherd boy; most of his time spent was isolated, tending his sheep. That’s where he built his relationship with God. This cave of mine is where God has showed me many treasures of darkness. It was also in the isolation of tending his sheep, that God trained David to be a warrior... by killing the lion and the bear.

My friend Nancy’s life circumstances are so similar, and we both know it was only by God’s mercy we have been connected as friends. We speak the same language. We’re attempting to give you small snapshots of our lives. Just trying to keep it real. Like Joseph, we also are being severely tried. But we know God has a plan. Nancy has been in the wilderness eight years so far, so here’s what she has to say...

The wilderness for me has been an intense mental battle. If you see me personally, I look well. Folks cannot believe that I really have a disability. Family members have told me that I am crazy. Family, who has seen me “react” many times, fails to believe that I really have a breathing disability. Dear friends have questioned me, expressing much doubt that this is even real. When you are ill, and those that are supposed to love and support you don’t, is when the mental battle keeps raging higher and higher.

Because I am now very sensitive to my environment—pesticides, perfume/cologne, scented products, cigarette smoke, formaldehyde, toluene, fluoride, chlorine, etc.—I am not able to go to many places. I must go to the grocery store to buy food, yet I struggle there because there are

so many toxins coming from all of the cleaning products, etc. I am not able to go to the mall because of the many-many scents there, plus the outgassing of the fabrics, carpeting, etc. I am not able to travel—they spray air planes with pesticides plus they “recycle” the air the entire flight and all of those perfumes/colognes never stop. I am not able to go to a beauty salon to have my hair done. I can’t get manicures or pedicures. I can’t pump gas in my car. I can’t rent a car. I am not able to attend church. Now I am not able to sit outside on my porch because my neighbors spray pesticides. I am trapped in my house with the A/C on. Can you imagine, I sit in my house and watch the township spray pesticides on the park across from my house? Little children play there. I know what those pesticides are doing to me. What are they doing to those little children? That takes a lot of “mental energy.” Without Jesus this would totally defeat me.

IF I do go to the mall with someone, I tell them that I am like the Energizer Bunny. I will start out with a lot of energy and all of a sudden start to slow down, and get slower and slower. I will stumble. I will not be able to think clearly. Then I will have to sit down. Finally, I will need help getting off of the bench. I’ve been “poisoned” by all of the toxins in the environment. Other people aren’t affected, and they can’t understand what is the matter with me. They have even told me that it is all my head.

The devil knows who I am. He has attacked my family. My family is the most important to me. I raised my children in the church. They were both saved many years ago, but they are not worshipping and serving the Lord at this time. I married a Catholic man. He calls himself a “non-practicing Catholic.” The devil knows how much this hurts me. The devil knows that I cry and plead with the Lord to draw my family to Him. The devil just laughs. There is a constant spiritual battle going on with Satan.

I fight a lot in my mind and there have been many times I have said to the Lord, “what is going to happen to me?” My world is getting smaller daily. I had a reaction when I went to see the doctor... he happened to be wearing aftershave. I cannot be in hospitals. What will I do if I get sick? Doctors have looked at me and told me that I am “deconditioned”—OUT OF SHAPE—that’s why I cannot breathe. I am in the worst shape of my life, but I also know that it takes every single drop of my energy just to do daily life. I’m always so tired and there is not any extra get-up-and-go to be had.

The fight never ends. I have been fighting like never before. There are inner voices that do not belong to God. They are trying to take away my faith and my courage. The battle seems to be all uphill. Last year fifteen of our friends and family members died. The grief has been debilitating at times. My husband is suffering from several medical conditions/issues. Our life style is very stressful, and all of this greatly affects my health.

However, God has determined to do something in my life. Daily I thank Him for the strength He gives me. He gives me the strength to destroy every weapon of darkness and condemn every tongue that comes against me. I continue to stand for Christ. I know that He has a plan for me and it will not be amputated. Christ will give me the grace and victory. I will rise up. The Lord does sustain me. He gives me the strength to help a friend in need. That is a huge blessing for me.

In all honesty, I fight against God at times because I thought my life would be different. I thought I would be different. I had plans. I had ideas. I was active. I was always helping others. I was involved. I liked doing what I did. Now I am troubled on every side. I have fears inside of me that were never there before. I am frail. I am in despair. I feel like I am a cast off.

I also question: Have I lost favor with God? Has God forgotten his mercy and promises? Is God busy? Is God angry? Did I offend God? Has God wasted His time with me? Is there a flaw in me that I am not aware of? Can I just sleep this away? Am I irrelevant in society? Why is my family far from me? Why is good called evil and evil called good? Sometimes I don't believe that my life can make a difference. I pray but God is not showing up. I pray and things are getting worse.

I cry. I cry myself to sleep. I don't know how this will change. I scream out to God to please help me. I don't know how I am going to go on. I don't know how I will get through this. Jesus help me.

When I walk through this valley I must always remember that the Lord is my Glory. God will never leave me. God will never forsake me. God will not forget me. God has engraved me on the palm of his hand. God will give me rest. God has set before me an open door and no one can close it. God has destined my life to be victorious. God has called me to be more than a conqueror. I will not be afraid. Nothing can separate me from the love of God. God will give me the strength for another day. My dreams will become

reality. I have read God's word. I read the end of the book. I know that Jesus wins!!!! Thanks be to God.

I cannot be weary. Great reward is waiting for me. I believe that Christ will do all that he promised. I will finish the course. I will not give up. I will not give in. I will STAND in the truth. I will STAND in the grace of God. I will STAND on the promises. I will STAND. God is all that matters.

This is my life. I will move toward the hope and the victory. God will give me the courage to STAND. God will give me the faith to believe. God will give me the strength to endure.

I WILL STAND!

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Let's fast-forward to the ending of Joseph's story...

"Pharaoh sent for Joseph at once, and he was quickly brought from the prison." Genesis 41: 14 NLT

I think you all know by now that's God's "quickly" isn't ours. We all know His timing is not the same as ours, and Oh, how frustrating that can be! It certainly wasn't quick for Joseph. Time seemed to move slowly for him. I can imagine—I really can—how Joseph must have felt; year after year nothing new, just more time spent in that filthy dungeon. I'm sure, that when Joseph was being taken to Pharaoh, his thoughts were probably, "Why should this time be any different?" Being in my physical prison for the last fourteen years, makes me totally agree with that question... "Why should this time be any different?"

The more I study the story of Joseph, the more I come to this conclusion—if it isn't the right time for you to be used mightily—God is simply going to make you wait. And that isn't saying He's not using you in your present situation. This is something we can't thoroughly understand with our limited minds, but God tells us His ways and thoughts are higher than ours... that is just the way it is. But the story of Joseph does tell me our most important opportunities may come when we least expect them.

Did Joseph have time to prepare when he was hastily brought from the dungeon to see Pharaoh? Yes and no; he had no warning that he would be suddenly pulled from the dungeon and questioned by the king. **But he was ready for anything because of his right relationship with God.**

Joseph certainly didn't understand his brother's cruelty towards him, the false accusations from Potiphar's wife, and the years of unjust abandonment in prison. Yet he trusted God, and look what happened... He became the second most powerful ruler in Egypt! All because God's plan for him was for him to preserve the lives of an entire nation!

There's much to be gleaned from the story of Joseph. All of the adversity Joseph endured was his boot camp; it made the man. God had a purpose in the delay and now the purpose can be seen! God had something so much better in mind for Joseph than he could have ever imagined. He had made him ready to take on the role as Egypt's governor, and just as Joseph had originally dreamt, his brothers bowed down to him...

"Now Joseph was governor over the land; and it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the earth." Genesis 42:6 NKJV

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For those who believe in the love and wisdom of a sovereign God, even a terrible confinement can be a place of building trust. Thank you God, for showing us how much we need you.

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