

“Wherever you are on your special-needs journey, this book will touch your heart. It will give you inspiration as you finish the course God has for your precious family.”

—LYNDA T. YOUNG, author of *Hope for Families of Children on the Autistic Spectrum* and *Hope for Families of Children with Cancer*

“Parenting a child with special needs is no easy task. I know: I’ve been there. I recall the day my daughter was born and our lives flipped upside down. I remember the financial uncertainties, the multiple hospitalizations, and the never-ending medical appointments and therapy sessions. But I also remember experiencing God’s faithfulness in the midst. And that’s where one’s focus must rest in order to thrive amidst the challenges. This devotional will lead you to that place. Its words inspire hope in God and trust in his ways and wisdom. Let them lead you to the Father’s heart, renew your perspective, and refresh your spirit.”

—GRACE FOX, author of *Moving from Fear to Freedom*

“Parents of children with special needs too often inhabit a dry and thirsty land of isolation and despair. Kimberly Drew and Jocelyn Green’s devotional offers living water and food for the soul to families wandering in the desert. Filled with stories and advice from parents who have walked the same road, and replete with promises and encouragement from Scripture, *Refresh* is an oasis of hope for families living with the realities of special-needs parenting. I highly recommend it.”

—JOLENE PHILO, national speaker and author of *A Different Dream for My Child* and *Different Dream Parenting*

“I had to pull over on the way home to cry. I had lost the mother-daughter relationship and future I had dreamed about.’ When I read these words in the first pages of *Refresh*, I knew immediately that these authors trod the same path I had. They know the weaknesses of my heart and that God is the source of strength that sustains me. This

devotional touches the heart and soul of parents with children who need special care, no matter how extensive that care may be. *Refresh* is truly refreshment along this trail given to us by God.”

—SUSAN K. STEWART, author of *Preschool: At What Cost?*,
www.practicalinspirations.com

“Parents of special-needs children feel so alone and misunderstood, but Jocelyn and Kimberly give them a voice and a loving shoulder to lean on just when they wonder if they’re going to make it. With empathy and encouraging words from the Lord, coupled with stories that will tug at every parent’s heart, *Refresh* is more than a devotional—it’s a life-line of hope.”

—JANET THOMPSON, founder of Woman to Woman Mentoring,
speaker, and author of *Forsaken God?*

REFRESH

Spiritual Nourishment *for* Parents
of Children *with* Special Needs

KIMBERLY M. DREW & JOCELYN GREEN

 Kregel
Publications

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From Kimberly:

To Abbey,

for teaching me more about Jesus
than anyone else on earth.

From Jocelyn:

To Wendy and Ronnie, and to
Laura and Craig, with all my heart.
And in loving memory of Waverly
Mae McNeil, who inspires us still.

I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint.

JEREMIAH 31:25

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Above all, thank you, Lord, that your light is brighter than any darkness. Thank you for being our very hope.

INTRODUCTION

Dear Friends,
There are many books out there on how to raise special children. This one is about raising up the parents.

Some of you are just joining us with a new diagnosis. We know how scary and overwhelming that time can be. Some of you are starting to find your way and are learning how to navigate the medical world and school system. Some of you are veterans and have been loving and serving your child with special needs for a very long time. But we all have something in common: our children. They were fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27; Ps. 139:13–16). They are changing our lives, and the lives of those around us, every day.

Just as you pour yourselves into your children, we want to pour hope and courage back into you. We want to refresh your spirit by speaking biblical truth directly to the unique aspects of your particular lifestyle. As you read this book, you'll meet dozens of other parents on a journey similar to yours, whose children represent a wide variety of physical and mental challenges. Know this, dear friend: you are not alone. Regardless of which particular diagnoses are mentioned in *Refresh*, the struggles and joys borne out of them are ones you can relate to. We want you to meet the parents who share their stories here, but most importantly, we want you to meet Jesus within the pages of

this book. The message of hope is the thread that binds these stories all together.

That message is the person and work of Jesus Christ. We hope and pray you know him personally already. If you don't, or if you're unsure, please refer to "Knowing Jesus Personally" in the back of the book. For those who already have a relationship with Christ, we pray that this book will be a great encouragement to you in your walk with him. Whether your faith is dormant or flourishing today, know that we've been praying for you for years. God longs to meet with you, no matter where you are on the journey.

As you read through these devotions, ask God to be with you and to open your heart to his Word and his Holy Spirit. After each devotional there is a prayer you can pray and a series of questions. Take the time to really think about how you would respond. We encourage you to journal your thoughts. If God is working in your heart or teaching you something new about himself, share it with your spouse or a close friend.

We echo the heart of Paul in his letter to the Colossian church: "My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:2–3).

God is always at work. These pages are a testament to the work he is doing in the lives of everyone who participated in any part of this devotional. From all of us to all of you: feel loved, be encouraged, pursue Christ, press on.

With sincere love and gratitude,
Kimberly M. Drew and Jocelyn Green

ONE

Uprooted When Life's Landscape Changes

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

EPHESIANS 3:16-18

LIFE IS SHORT, ETERNITY IS LONG

Kimberly

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18

When Abbey was very little, we moved out of state and started the search for a whole new medical team to treat her developmental delays. At the new pediatrician's office, the doctor looked her over and worked with her muscles. When the words "cerebral palsy" came out of his mouth, I stood there with my own gaping wide open. I had to ask him to repeat himself. In a casual second to him, my world went from "delay" (with the hope of someday catching up) to a lifelong diagnosis of disability. I had to pull over on the way home to cry.

I had lost the mother-daughter relationship and future I had dreamed about since the day they told me, "It's a girl." Predictions of the future, paired with memories of my own childhood as a little girl, flooded my heart with grief. As the extent of our daughter's disabilities

unfolded, I realized I would never hear the sound of a little girl humming and singing through the house. I would never watch her skip or play teatime with her dolls. All the moments that I longed for in this life would never happen the way I had hoped.

At some point in the grief process, I realized I had put my hope in the wrong future, and that's why it hurt so badly. It was why I could not heal and move on. The Lord began to whisper eternity over my soul with verses like 2 Corinthians 4:16–18. To accept Christ is to accept the gospel; to live in Christ is to live in the light of it. Because of what Christ has done for us on the cross, we hold on to the treasured promise that heaven makes all things right. Heaven restores things to the way they were meant to be. There are no diagnoses or disabilities in heaven.

Revelation 21:3–4 says about this new heaven,

I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Psalm 119:49–50 exclaims, “Remember your word to your servant, in which you have made me hope. This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life” (ESV). God’s Word gives us hope. This is our comfort, and the promises contained in his Word give us life.

Years ago, my mom started speaking the phrase “Life is short, eternity is long” over me. When this refrain becomes part of our souls, it helps transfer our affections and gaze from this life on earth to eternity with Christ. James 4:14 reminds us, “Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” This moment we are in right now is not the end of the story. An eternal perspective gives great hope.

Father, help me to fix my eyes on you and not on my child's diagnosis. Help me to trust you not only for this life but for eternity. Restore to me the joy of my salvation, and with it the great hope of heaven. In Jesus's name, amen.

DIGGING DEEPER

1. How have you handled your child's diagnosis?
2. What hope and comfort do you find in the promises of heaven with Christ?
3. What can you do to foster this truth in your life?

MORE THAN WE CAN HANDLE

Jocelyn

My soul is weary with sorrow;
strengthen me according to your word.

PSALM 119:28

When Nichole was born with Down syndrome, the doctor told Ellen and Andy Stumbo that he was sorry. “Don’t say you are sorry,” Ellen chastised him. “Our baby is exactly who she is meant to be. God does not make mistakes.”

“You religious people handle things better,” the doctor replied.¹

As a pastor’s wife, Ellen told herself she ought to handle it just fine. But Ellen didn’t want her baby. She was afraid of an unknown future full of limitations, and she mourned the loss of the baby she had expected to welcome. “And I was afraid that my family in Mexico would believe the very thoughts I wrestled with that were prevalent in our culture. That I had done something wrong and was getting what I deserved. Or that Nichole would never be whole. Although I knew it was not true, those lies would suck at my heart, like leeches, and I painfully would pull them out.”²

It would be easier if she died, Ellen thought. The pain and sadness I have is engulfing me, Lord! I don’t know how I will ever be able to enjoy life again! I don’t want this child!

Her wish for her baby to die terrified her. Sadness, worry, and anger plagued her so intensely that it was a relief to Andy when he left home for work. Finally one night, Ellen asked him, “The Bible says that God does not give us more than we can handle, right?”

He paused. “[First Corinthians 10:13] is often taken out of context. That verse refers to temptation. God will not give us more *temptation* than we can handle.”

“Well, does God give us more than we can handle when it comes to . . . life?” Ellen asked.

“Yes, honey. If we could handle it, we would not need God. But when we are given more than we can handle, it is then, and only then, that we realize how much we need him.”

*This is more than I can handle, Lord, Ellen prayed that night. I need you to step in.*³

If you too feel overwhelmed right now, whether from a diagnosis, or a new test result, or the daily challenges that make up your new normal, then telling yourself you should be able to handle it will not help you. Jesus never said we should manage on our own. He said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). We don’t have to be strong enough to conquer it all—Jesus is! And it is his strength, not ours, that we are urged to rely upon throughout the Scriptures:

The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him,
and I am helped. (Ps. 28:7 NASB)

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.
(Ps. 46:1)

I can do all this through him who gives me strength. (Phil. 4:13)

The next time you find yourself saying, “I can’t do this,” add two words on the end: “without you.” You were never meant to live your life

without God's strength, his patience, his grace. Your life may be more than you can handle alone, but nothing is too difficult for God.

Lord, this is more than I can handle on my own. Fill me with your strength. Grant me your love for my child. Thank you that you don't make mistakes—help me truly believe it! In Jesus's name, amen.

DIGGING DEEPER

1. What feels like more than you can handle right now?
2. What is one area you're trying to control but can't?
3. Identify a time when God's strength really carried you through.

OUT OF THE PIT

Jocelyn

He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

PSALM 40:2

Ellen Stumbo’s hands shook as she hung up the phone. The liver condition detected in her baby, the doctor had called to say, could be fatal. *“Oh dear Lord. I asked you to take my baby away, and now you are letting me have my way. My baby is going to die.”*⁴

Guilt and fear knocked Ellen to the floor and unleashed a torrent of sobs. “I faced the dark hole I had been living in since Nichole’s birth,” she wrote on her blog. “It was deep, murky, and tight. It had become a prison. Life happened around me, yet I was stuck. My tears had been so abundant I would soon be covered in my own grief. And it was my despair over what I saw as unfair that would cause me to drown—not my baby, and not her diagnosis. The unending tears blinded me.”⁵

Who among us has not spent time in a similar “hole” of our own? In Genesis we read the story of Joseph being thrown into the pit by his brothers. “The pit was empty; there was no water in it” (Gen. 37:24 NKJV). Despair is also empty, dark, isolating, and void of nourishment.

Job suffered so greatly that his wife suggested he “curse God and die!” (Job 2:9).

Though the prophet Elijah fled to a mountaintop after his exhausting fight with the prophets of Baal, he found himself in an emotional and spiritual pit. “I have had enough, LORD,” he said. “Take my life” (1 Kings 19:4). But that wasn’t God’s plan. Twice he sent an angel to bring food and drink to Elijah, saying, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you” (v. 7).

The journey is too much for you. The Lord knows this. He did not ridicule or minimize Elijah’s desperation, and he doesn’t do that to us, either. May we cry to God for help, as David did: “Do not let the floodwaters engulf me or the depths swallow me up or the pit close its mouth over me” (Ps. 69:15).

For God is mighty to save (Ps. 40:2). Though he allows us to experience the pit, and we must work through our grief, he does not desire that we dwell there permanently.

That day Ellen learned Nichole could die, she searched her heart. “Could I live knowing I held back from loving my baby because she was not what I had expected, not what I wanted?” She pulled herself to her knees, stretched out her arms to God and cried, “I choose love, Lord! From this day on, with everything that is within me, I choose love!’ And God pulled me out of the hole, and held me in his arms. Because he had chosen love for me too.”⁶

That was several years ago. While Ellen remembers that scare as the moment God pulled her up out of her pit, her life has not been grief-free ever since. She loves Nichole fiercely. Still, grief rolls in and out like an irregular tide, with new medical complications, difficult IEP meetings, missed milestones, and even memories. In her memoir *Sun Shine Down*, Gillian Marchenko shares that when her daughter with Down syndrome was twenty-one months old, “Grief packed up his bags and told me he was going hitchhiking across the country, though he promised to send postcards.”⁷

No matter how many times we slip into grief, God does not scold us for being there. Gently, lovingly, he offers his hand. His message to Elijah he says to us as well: *I know the journey is too much for you. Let me help you up and nourish you with living water.*

Lord, help me learn how to grieve my losses in healthy ways. Thank you that I don't need to hide my grief from you. Help me up out of the pit, and give me a firm place to stand. In Jesus's name, amen.

DIGGING DEEPER

1. When was the last time you felt stuck in a pit?
2. What most helped you to climb out?
3. Next time you slip into a pit, how do you hope to handle it?