

Foreword by Sheila Walsh

JARRETT STEPHENS

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THE

ALWAYS

GOD



HE HASN'T CHANGED
AND YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN

PRAISE FOR
THE ALWAYS GOD



“In our ever-changing world, there is one constant: God never leaves, never forgets, and never changes. Let Jarrett Stephens direct to you toward truths that will ground you in God’s love and show you how to let his grace turn your season around. I highly recommend *The Always God!*”

—DARRYL STRAWBERRY,
four-time World Series champion and evangelist

“In these pages, you’ll find empathy, wisdom, encouragement, and a thoroughly biblical perspective for times when God seems distant or disinterested. Jarrett Stephens doesn’t flinch as he courageously confronts some of the most nettlesome issues that vex so many followers of Jesus. Whatever you do, don’t miss this journey toward wholeness. Let Jarrett lead you to a place of genuine hope and faith!”

—LEE STROBEL, bestselling author
of *The Case for Christ* and *The Case for Miracles*

“Do you wonder if God has forgotten you? Are your circumstances and situations getting the best of you? Psalm 90:2 says, ‘From everlasting to everlasting you are God.’ But sometimes we don’t realize it and don’t live it. In *The Always God*, Jarrett Stephens shows us that the biblical God who sees, hears, and speaks is our same God today. If you are broken, fearful, angry, anxious, or lost, the always God is always here for you.”

—KYLE IDLEMAN, senior pastor of Southeast Christian Church
and author of *Not a Fan* and *Don’t Give Up*

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“Jarrett Stephens is a man who knows and loves God—who is always present, who is forever faithful, and who never stops working in our lives. *The Always God* is filled with insights, encouragement, and promises from God’s Word that will fill you with faith, hope, and love for the One who never fails. Read this book and deepen your confidence in the grace and glory of our God.”

—JACK GRAHAM, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church
and leader of PowerPoint Ministries

“We read about God’s promises for love and protection, but what do we do when it feels like he’s breaking them? Jarrett Stephens eloquently guides us to see God as the same God of fulfilled promises—yesterday, today, and forever. *The Always God* shows us how to live in faith and walk through all that is in front of us by remembering who our God truly is.”

—LEVI LUSKO, lead pastor of Fresh Life Church
and bestselling author

“*The Always God* is a refreshing, comforting reminder of the good news that God is for us. If you, like me, sometimes struggle to feel the closeness of God or sometimes wonder whether he hears you or is on your side, read this book carefully. You will find the strong hope of Jesus in its pages.”

—JARED C. WILSON, assistant professor of pastoral ministry
at Spurgeon College, author in residence at Midwestern Seminary,
and author of *The Imperfect Disciple*

“*The Always God* is a tour de force through the labyrinth of questions surrounding human suffering. The main path is well worn: ‘If God is both good and all powerful, why doesn’t he do something to eliminate, or at least alleviate, suffering?’ Jarrett Ste-

phens guides us through the maze with bracing biblical truth and pastoral compassion. This is a therapeutic theology.”

—MARK E. MOORE, PhD, author of *Core 52*

“In this book, Jarrett Stephens opens a window into our souls as he unveils the honest questions we ask about God’s presence in our pivotal moments. His clear language and profound yet practical answers compel us to discover the always God in a superior dimension and leave us with a deep thirst for his constant presence.”

—RAMON MEDINA, Spanish global pastor
at Champion Forest Baptist Church

“Everyone struggles to find and understand God in this often upside-down world. With a pastor’s heart, Jarrett weaves solid theology with relatable stories to guide us in this journey. Read this book for hope and understanding, but don’t be surprised to see your faith grow stronger.”

—MARK LANIER, trial lawyer
and author of *Christianity On Trial*

“*The Always God* is a timely, much-needed reminder of the steady attributes of God. Whether you’re struggling with faith, looking to grow in your walk with Jesus, or just needing a fresh reminder of our always God, this book will meet you where you are. My good friend Jarrett Stephens reminds us of an ever-present God, who sees us, hears us, and speaks to us in the midst of every circumstance. Read this book—and be ready to meet the always God there.”

—SHANE PRUITT, national next-gen director
for the North American Mission Board (NAMB)
and author of *9 Common Lies Christians Believe*

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“Trying to comprehend a supernatural God can be so difficult. We can’t see, hear, or touch God, which makes us doubt his existence. But Jarrett Stephens has given us a remarkable gift with his new book, *The Always God*. More than a gift, it’s a key—a powerful tool for unlocking a sense of God’s presence in our lives. In your dark moments, when you feel that God isn’t there or has abandoned you, reach for this book.”

—PHIL COOKE, PHD, media producer
and author of *Maximize Your Influence*

“In *The Always God*, Jarrett presents helpful handholds as he moves us through the questions we all ask at some point in our faith journey. His book is engaging, practical, reflective, and will make you love the Lord more. I am always looking for resources to stir my affections for Jesus, and this is one of them.”

—JONATHAN POKLUDA, lead pastor
of Harris Creek Baptist Church and author of *Outdated*

“*The Always God* is a timely, powerful word for our world, where nothing good seems to last. We need to know God will always be with us and for us. Be encouraged by this message of the timeless love of God.”

—GREGG MATTE, pastor of Houston’s First Baptist Church
and author of *Difference Makers*

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*To my mom and dad, Glynn and Cheryl Stephens,
thank you for your love, encouragement, and support.*

I am proud to be your son.

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From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

PSALM 90:2

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FOREWORD



The word *always* is interesting. It gets its meaning from what we attach it to. It can bear great news, such as “The food is always amazing here!” It can also let us know to lower our expectations, such as “The service is always slow here.” When attached to faith in God, however, it can raise as many questions as it answers. You may have faced some of these:

I believe that God is always present, so why do I feel all alone?

I believe that God is always working for my good, so why didn't I get that job?

I believe that God always answers prayer, so why does heaven seem silent?

These kinds of questions can shake our faith to the core.

I remember being challenged once by a woman with heart-breaking questions of her own. It was several years ago. I was speaking at a conference in South Africa, and she had waited until the crowd was gone before she approached me. She was angry, but I could tell that just beneath that mask, she was hurting. She told me I had said two things on the platform that couldn't possibly *both* be true. I would have to pick one. I asked her what they were.

She replied, “You said that God is loving and God is powerful.”

I told her I believe that both of those things are true. She asked

me to explain the death of her child and then collapsed into my arms in tears.

What she was facing is one of the greatest challenges to faith. If God is loving and powerful, why would he allow any of the tragedies that strike our lives? When prayer seems to go no higher than the bedroom ceiling or when one more door is slammed on us, it's tempting to believe that God has forgotten where we live or doesn't care about what's happening to us.

In uncertain times, *The Always God* is a must-read for all of us. I have had the privilege of sitting under the teaching ministry of Jarrett Stephens for years. It's a joy to call him my friend. One of his greatest gifts is his ability to combine transparency and truth. He is honest and vulnerable about his own life and the questions he's dealt with. He's not afraid to ask the difficult questions, but he always leads us back to the powerful promises in God's Word. You won't want to rush through this book. It will make you think and challenge you to be honest with yourself and with God. If you've been struggling in your faith or simply want to grow stronger, then you have the perfect guidebook in your hands. When you turn the final page, you'll have a fresh confidence in these foundational truths:

God is always here.

God is always working.

God is always faithful.

Always.

—Sheila Walsh

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INTRODUCTION



Always? Are you sure?

God is always *for* you. He is always a supernatural God, who will do miracles for you as he has done in the past. God is always *with* you. He is always watching, always caring, and always reaching.

God is always *in* you. He is always providing unlimited power and encouragement.

And all God's people said, "Are you sure?"

Let me assure you, I *am* sure. Except when I'm not.

Never waver, never doubt, never question—as a pastor, I feel like this is the posture of certainty I'm supposed to take in every situation. I should always have the answers, right? When I don't? I should be confident and act like I do! But if I'm being honest, I am not always certain what God is up to and find myself confused by what he's allowing in my life. (Can I lose my pastor's license for just *writing* that last sentence?)

It's uncomfortable for me to admit, but I relate well to the father who had a sick child and told Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24, *ESV*). My experiences in life bear out this complexity. When I read God's Word or hear other pastors preach from it, I always want to respond with "Amen!" But then life throws a curveball, and my "Amen!" turns to "Are you sure?"

I do believe God is good all the time and all the time God is good. "Amen!"

But when I was being sexually abused by my Little League coach from age eight to twelve, I struggled to believe this truth about God. “Are you sure?” ambushed my “Amen!”

I do believe every perfect gift comes down from the Father. “Amen!”

But when my wife had a miscarriage, I struggled to believe this was true in my case. “Are you sure?” ambushed my “Amen!”

I do believe God is always seeking the lost, pursuing the one who is far from him. “Amen!”

But when my brother walked away from his faith and rebuffed my attempts to share Jesus with him, I struggled with some serious doubt. “Are you sure?” ambushed my “Amen!”

I do believe God is always with us, taking care of his own. “Amen!”

But when Mike, my friend and mentor who’s one of the most faithful Christians I knew, was diagnosed with cancer and died, I struggled to believe God was coming through on what he’d promised. “Are you sure?” ambushed my “Amen!”

I want to believe I’m the only one with these struggles, but I know I’m not. I’ve been a pastor now for more than twenty years. I get to be with people in their best moments—“Life is awesome! Let’s take a celebration selfie!”—the birth of children, beautiful weddings, picking up finally sober loved ones from rehab. And I get to be with people in their heart-crushing moments—“Why is this happening?”—the death of a baby, an unexpected divorce, dropping no-longer-sober loved ones back off at rehab.

I bet you’ve been there. Something awful happened, disrupting your life and disorienting your faith. Your life had been comfortable and you were confident. Suddenly your life was chaotic and you were confused. Doubts crept in where there had always been certainty. It wasn’t that you lost your faith, because you still believed, but your faith was now challenged by questions that had never occurred to you or bothered you before.

For you, it might be

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Someone you loved got a cancer diagnosis and then quickly he was gone.

You've been desperately searching for a job, but no doors seem to be opening.

You discover a text exchange between your spouse and a stranger. You read the words over and over, trying to understand, but deep down you already know. It feels like a bomb is settling in your stomach.

You raised your child to love Jesus, but you are realizing she just doesn't love him. Your heart breaks with every step she takes away from God.

You don't know what to do. But you do believe that God is the only one who can help you. You have prayed prayers on top of prayers, but God has been strangely quiet, and it leaves you wrestling with the disquieting question of whether he even hears you.

You've been there, right? We've *all* gone through circumstances that cause us to question what God is doing. We ask, *Is he aware of what's happening? Does he even care?*

We read in the Bible about miracles God performed and wonder if maybe God coming through for people like that is relegated to the past. God did that back then, but life seems to prove he doesn't work in the same way now. We read promises God made, like "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5), and we don't want to admit that it just doesn't feel that way at times.

Have you ever wondered if maybe God has forgotten you? If we are going to be completely honest—and that's exactly what I hope we'll be, so let's agree to be totally honest with each other throughout this book—I bet you have felt pretty sure that God has forgotten you. When you considered the confusing circumstances of your life and the long list of unanswered desperate voice mails you've left God, this conclusion is painful but seems unavoidable.

I realize you may not be comfortable being this honest—it

might be more real and raw than you typically permit yourself to be—but it may help you to know that you’re not alone.

In fact, *Jesus* has been there. On the night before he was crucified, he went to a garden where “he sank into a pit of suffocating darkness” (Mark 14:33, MSG). He was real and raw, saying, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38). We see Jesus questioning God’s plan for him. The next day he cries out, wondering if God had forsaken him.

But I have good news: you are not alone.

More good news: you can go from “Are you sure?” back to “Amen!”

Jesus did.

I have too.

If you’re struggling with a little doubt, I believe you need two things.

First, you need to be reassured that God is still God—that he is *always* God. You need to be reassured that you can stand firm in your faith, fully trusting him, knowing that he will carry you and not drop you and that your trust in him will not be in vain.

Second, you need to be invited to push through your questions to a deeper faith. Peter tells us that we go through the painful fire of these trials so that our faith can be tested, proved, and refined (1 Peter 1:6–9), which will lead us into “an inexpressible and glorious joy” (verse 8). I’ve noticed that just about all the heroes in the Bible—as well as the people I personally know whose spiritual maturity I admire and long to emulate—had their faith galvanized through a crucible of unwanted trials and uncomfortable doubts. If we walk that same path, we can end up spiritually mature with a deeper faith, just as the heroes of the Bible also grew.

I wrote this book for you because I’ve been where you are. As a pastor, I walk with people who are where you are: in the midst of a trial, needing to be reminded that our God is *always* God and needing to be invited to journey with him to a place of greater

assurance and intimacy. Regardless of how things may seem, he is always the same and can always be trusted.

One time, after I spoke at a conference in Europe, my wife and I traveled to Prague. The city is amazing. It has so much character and history. It was the vacation of a lifetime! And it was just the two of us—we left our four daughters at home with their grandparents. (I haven't mentioned yet—I have *four* daughters and a wife. I am the president of my own sorority. I do have a male dog, but he's fixed, so he doesn't really count.)

At first, we were just in awe of Prague. The city is beautiful, ancient, and mysterious. But we quickly realized that we were disoriented. We loved being there, but we weren't sure where to go or what to do. Fortunately, we had booked a bike tour. An *electric* bike tour, that is—I didn't want to have to work too hard because I was on vacation! We were newbies, but the tour guide was familiar with Prague and navigated us through the city. By the end of the tour, the city felt familiar, and we spent the rest of our time in Prague with confidence.

I think many, at first, are just in awe of God. God and his Word are beautiful, ancient, and mysterious. But then when adversity assaults us, we can become disoriented. We still love God, but we aren't sure exactly where to go or what to do. In those moments, we need a tour guide—someone who is familiar with suffering and someone who can help us navigate through our doubts and questions until our faith feels more familiar again and we can walk with confidence.

I would love to be that tour guide for you. That's the heart behind this book. If you let me, here's where I want to take you.

TOUR ONE: ALWAYS HERE

We all face situations that cause us to wonder whether God really knows or cares about what we are up against. In this section, we will seek to answer questions so many of us have asked:

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Does God really see me and the situation I'm going through? If so, why does it feel like he doesn't? Is he ignoring me?

Does God really hear me? I know that he claims to listen, but if so, how do you explain all my unanswered prayers?

Does God really speak to me? Yeah, I can read the Bible, but I need God to help me with the decision I have to make and to guide me through the problem I'm having. I'm listening, so if he's speaking, I don't get it.

TOUR TWO: ALWAYS WORKING

Maybe God is always here, but is he doing anything?

If you've asked that question, I get it. I've been there. And as a pastor, I have met with thousands of people over the years, and most are honest and share their struggles with me. I've noticed some themes, and I want to walk with you through some questions I have wondered and have heard over and over:

Why isn't God pursuing this person I love who is far from him? I thought God wants everyone to be saved!

Can God truly restore my life? Sometimes I think I'm just too broken. Maybe even God can't heal me.

I worry all the time, and I really need God to calm my anxiety. How do I get the peace that he promises?

God tells us not to fear, but I am afraid about so many things. It doesn't help to tell me not to fear; I already know I shouldn't. I can't seem to stop. Why won't God take away my fear?

I feel so alone. If God is with me, I just can't feel it. Can he do something about my loneliness?

It's probably a sin, but I get angry—a lot. And the problem seems to actually be getting worse! How can God help me with my anger?

I feel so guilty about something I've done. Does God really forgive my sin? If he does, why don't I feel forgiven?

TOUR THREE: ALWAYS FAITHFUL

God asks us to put our faith in him. In fact, he tells us that it's impossible to please him without faith. This sounds great; we all like the idea of faith. But I've found that it doesn't always come easily. People in churches around the country have told me about their struggles with faith. They whisper questions like these:

*Can I really trust God? If I do, what if he doesn't come through
for me?*

I want to put my hope in God, but what if he disappoints me?

Can you have an unwavering confidence that God is always here and always working? Can you get to a place where, no matter what happens, your "Amen!" overwhelms your "Are you sure?"

It's been a wild and sometimes painful journey, but that's where God has taken me and where I believe he will take you as you read this book. My prayer is that you will discover in a very personal and powerful way just how faithful the always God really is.

So, are you ready? Let's go.

TOUR ONE



ALWAYS
HERE

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CHAPTER 1
ALWAYS SEEING

*Does God really see me? If so, why does it feel
like he doesn't? Is he ignoring me?*

I'll never forget the phone call. My sister and her family were visiting us, and we were on our way to eat lunch. As we drove to the restaurant, I got a phone call from one of my college roommates from back in the day. I normally would have picked up, but because my sister was in town and we were catching up, I decided to let the call go to voice mail. About ten minutes passed. We were all piling out of the car to head into the restaurant when the phone rang again. It was the same friend.

I've been in ministry long enough to know that back-to-back phone calls in a short time span are rarely good. I told my family to go in, and I took the phone call.

"Did you hear about Zac?"

No greeting. No pleasantries. Just this question.

Zac, another roommate from college, was one of the funniest people I have ever met. A good comparison is Chandler from *Friends*. Sarcastic. Witty. Quick with a comeback. Everyone who knew Zac liked him.

When we graduated college, I moved to Dallas and he went back home to northwest Arkansas. We didn't remain in close contact through the years. We would send texts back and forth every now and then. We followed each other on social media, and occasionally he'd make fun of me in a comment.

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Zac had married a few years ago and then had a son. He and his wife, Kelly, were very open on social media about their journey raising their son, Everett (or Ev), who was diagnosed with achondroplasia shortly after his birth. Most people know it as dwarfism. Because of his son's condition, Zac had been on my mind a lot and I prayed for him often.

Zac and Kelly were doing an amazing job at not only raising Ev but also helping to educate many people on the facts about dwarfism. They were living out their faith in a way that was honest, real, and transparent. I knew Zac was a believer, and I could tell caring for his son was taking him deeper in his walk with the Lord.

The day I got the phone call was Zac's forty-first birthday. Evidently, he left his house after having breakfast with Kelly and Ev and hopped on his brand-new motorcycle. As he was pulling out of the neighborhood, the bike got away from him and he ran into oncoming traffic. He died instantly.

Forty-one years old.

On his birthday.

Leaving behind a beautiful wife and three-year-old boy.

I felt numb. When I got off the phone and walked into the restaurant to join my family, my wife and sister immediately knew something was wrong. I told them the news and made it through lunch the best I could.

But I could not stop thinking about Zac. More than that, I could not get Kelly and Everett off my mind. None of it made sense to me.

How could this happen? What was God doing?

EYES LIKE ROZ

One of my girls' favorite movies when they were little was *Monsters, Inc.* Well, I'll be honest, this was one of *my* favorites. Who

couldn't like the lead characters—er, monsters—James P. Sullivan and Mike Wazowski?

These two monsters were the exact opposite in personality but made a great team. Mike was the more responsible of the two but could be a bit of an airhead. Sulley was the larger-than-life, charismatic scare champion. Mike and Sulley partnered together at Monsters, Inc., to make sure the screams of boys and girls from all over the world kept their city powered.

They were supposed to file paperwork each day with Roz, a miserable and grumpy sluglike figure who had no love for Mike, his forgetfulness, or his schmoozing.

She constantly reminded him, "I'm watching you, Wazowski. Always watching."¹

We don't find out until the end of the movie that Roz actually worked undercover for the Child Detection Agency (CDA) and knew exactly what Mike and Sulley had been up to the entire time—because she was "always watching."

I thought about Roz when writing this chapter because sometimes I wonder if Roz was better at watching Mike Wazowski than God is at watching us.

That's how I felt when I heard about Zac, especially when I thought about Kelly and Ev in the days following the accident.

Didn't God see that Kelly needed Zac? Didn't he see that Ev needed his dad? Why wasn't God watching?

Surely, you have felt that way before. Something happened and you felt as though God must be taking a nap or, worse, turning his back on you. Either way, he must not see what's going on. If he did, whatever was happening wouldn't be taking place.

It might have been . . .

A relationship that went wrong.

Someone else getting the promotion you deserved.

The story in the news about another innocent person being killed.

The way your kid is struggling.

The prayer you've prayed and prayed without an answer.

Zac's death led me on a journey to see what the Bible had to say about all this. I knew Scripture promised that God was aware of our lives and was present in the midst of difficulty, but I needed more clarity.

I had attended a four-year Bible school, gotten my master's at a seminary, and completed my doctoral studies.

I had read all about God's omniscience—that he knows everything.

I had written papers on his omnipotence—that he can do anything.

In classes, we had debated his immutability—that he never changes.

I *knew* intellectually what the Bible says about the nature and character of God, but I was having a really hard time *believing* it after Zac's death.

ANTHROPOMORPHIWHAA?

I have a little joke I sometimes share with people about myself: My family is from Mississippi. I grew up in Louisiana and went to college in Arkansas. That means I am never the smartest person in the room—*ever*. I certainly felt that way when I was introduced to the term *anthropomorphism*. I had never heard it before and couldn't pronounce it. You should have seen how many times I tried spelling it while writing this paragraph.

Let me save you some google time. *Anthropomorphism* is a big, fancy term that theologians use for ascribing human characteristics to God. In this section, we're going to explore why it's so important that . . .

God sees.

God hears.

God speaks.

Anthropomorphism ascribes to God the same physical functions we humans have so that we can better understand him and how he operates. For example, we might say,

When God sees, he sees with his eyes.
 When God hears, he hears with his ears.
 When God speaks, he speaks with his mouth.

God does not physically have these functions of the human body because “God is spirit” (John 4:24). Anthropomorphism simply makes it a bit easier for us to fathom God.

As I dove into Scripture to understand what happened with Zac, it became abundantly obvious that although God may not have physical eyes, he sees farther, clearer, and more than we ever could.

For example, the Bible teaches over and over that God sees *what we do*. Listen to how the psalmist wrote it:

From heaven the LORD looks down
 and sees all mankind;
 from his dwelling place he watches
 all who live on earth—
 he who forms the hearts of all,
 who considers everything they do. (Psalm 33:13–15)

Did you notice that *all* was used three times in this passage? Read it again slowly. God sees everything. He “watches all” our deeds. Like for an all-star catcher in the major leagues, nothing gets past him—*nothing*. He sees everything we do.

God is sitting on his throne (more anthropomorphic language), and from there, his eyes are on us no matter where we go.

The eyes of the LORD are everywhere,
 keeping watch on the wicked and the good. (Proverbs 15:3)

In Ezekiel 1:18, God is represented by an item that is “covered with eyes” (NLT). The implication is clear: God is a God who sees.

Jesus also taught that God the Father sees what we are doing. He sees when we pray. He sees when we give. In maybe Jesus’s most famous teaching, the Sermon on the Mount, he shared that God sees even what we do in secret—when we give or pray without anyone else knowing, God knows (Matthew 6:6).

THERE’S AN APP FOR THAT

There seems to be an app for everything these days. Sometimes one comes along that catches the country’s attention for a few weeks. Not too long ago, the craze was an app that aged your face. When people put their photographs in, this app automatically aged them, wrinkles and all, twenty, thirty, or forty years down the road. I tried it, and let me just say that my wife has *much* to look forward to!

I think people loved that app and shared their aging pictures not just because it was funny but because they wonder about their future. We question what we’re going to look like. *Will my mind be as sharp? Will my body be strong and agile?*

While anthropomorphism has its strengths, one place it falls short is that when ascribing human characteristics to God, we also attach human weakness and frailty to him. I fear, like with FaceApp, we may assume God is aging, so to speak.

He’s old.

He can’t see as clearly as he once did. Getting a bit senile. Forgetful.

We might even think he has to take a nap from time to time. After all, that is what old people do. And if God is sleeping, he’s not watching.

No wonder he’s not seeing me in this tight spot I’m in. No wonder he’s not coming through for me. He’s sleeping.

Or is he?

We need to remember that although we use human traits to describe God, he is *not* human. In fact, the psalmist recorded that God never sleeps:

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot slip—
he who *watches* over you will not slumber;
indeed, he who *watches* over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD *watches* over you—
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.

The LORD will keep you from all harm—
he will *watch* over your life;
the LORD will *watch* over your coming and going
both now and forevermore. (Psalm 121, emphasis added)

How different God is from us! He doesn't sleep. He never needs a nap. We can know with confidence that nothing gets by him. He sees *everything* we do.

And because he is God, because he never sleeps, he also sees *what we don't*.

Remember where God is positioned? He is sitting on his throne, looking down from above.

GOD, THE COACH

I love football. My dream as I was growing up was to play college football, and I would have if any college coach had asked me! If I weren't a pastor, I promise you I'd be on the sidelines coaching football. Or maybe I'd be in the press box.

The press box is where most offensive and defensive coordinators spend their time during games. They sit there because of the perspective it offers. A coach on the sidelines can't see the whole field.

From the press box, the coordinators can see how the other team is lining up. They can watch which players are being substituted in and out. Because they see things from a different perspective, they can help determine a better strategy for winning the game. Where they are positioned in the press box allows them to see what others can't.

You get the analogy, right? Because of God's unique position, he sees things we don't. He doesn't see just our obedience and disobedience. He sees our motives—he sees *why* we obey or disobey.

I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind.
(Jeremiah 17:10)

A person may think their own ways are right,
but the LORD weighs the heart. (Proverbs 21:2)

Do you remember Samuel, the Old Testament prophet? God told him to visit a man named Jesse and to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the next king of Israel.

The first son's name was Eliab. Samuel was impressed with Eliab from the start.

He was strong.

He was tall.

He was handsome.

He was like Chris Hemsworth from the Marvel *Avengers* films. Who wouldn't want this Thor-like guy leading Israel? He was the first player chosen in all the pickup games. He dated any girl he was interested in because they all were interested in him. Surely, this was the next king.

But God was not nearly as impressed with Eliab.

The LORD said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7)

God sees what we don't! That is a good thing. Sometimes we think that he's not watching and that he doesn't see what we see. *Maybe he just doesn't care.* But I'm learning that it's what he sees and we *don't* that can be the biggest factor of all, the greatest proof that he cares more than we can imagine.

This is what the esteemed theologian Garth Brooks, in his song “Unanswered Prayers,” tried to get across: “Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.”² God doesn't always respond to our prayers the way we want because he sees what we don't.

God is the ultimate air-traffic controller! According to *Travel + Leisure*, “aviation data companies like FlightAware keep track of all (or at least most) of the aircraft in our skies.” According to their stats, in 2017 “there were an average of 9,728 planes—carrying 1,270,406 people—in the sky at any given time.”³

God sees them all.

God keeps track of them all.

God makes the call to keep them from hitting one another in the sky and guides them to land safely.

In our lives, God sees *all the pieces at play*

UNCORRECTED PROOF

When it comes to our lives, he sees what will bring us harm.
He sees what will bring him the most glory.

He sees the effect of every choice we make before we make it!

This is why we can believe with confidence the promise Paul wrote to the church in Rome: “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

What we see is limited; what God sees is not. Theologian John Piper tweeted this statement, and I kept it as a favorite: “God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, and you may be aware of three of them.”⁴

God sees what we don’t! God sees the invisible reality of the spiritual battle taking place all around us right now. He even sees our adversary, the devil, prowling around like a roaring lion seeking to devour us (1 Peter 5:8). Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus,

Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.
(Ephesians 6:11–12)

If the curtains could be pulled back for us to see what God sees, we would be stunned. We would also be terrified. Because he loves and cares for us, God lets us know in his Word what is really going on, including the unseen battle we are in and the invisible enemies we are up against.

God sees what we do.

God sees what we don’t.

God also sees *what has us down*.

THE GOD WHO SEES ME

I have always loved studying the different names of God. Throughout the Old Testament, God revealed himself and his ways to people by using different names.

In my first book, *The Mountains Are Calling*, I described Abraham's journey to Mount Moriah to obey God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac. I still can't imagine what was going through Abraham's mind as he made the three-day trek up the mountain.

After arriving at the specific place where he was to sacrifice his son, Abraham tied Isaac to the altar and raised his knife. In that moment of Abraham's complete surrender and obedience, God stopped him from going through with this sacrifice and instead provided a ram caught in a thicket. It was a substitute for Isaac. The Bible tells us, "Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, 'On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided'" (Genesis 22:14).

From that day on, God would be known as Jehovah-Jireh, which means "the Lord will provide." The names of God are revealed throughout Scripture, and I have found them to be extremely meaningful in my personal walk with him.

One of the names used to describe God's character and nature is El Roi. Can you guess what it means? "The God who sees."

How incredible is that? God is not just a God who sees. He is a personal God who sees *me*. He sees *you*.

I love that! And I love the following story of how this name of God was first revealed.

Abraham had a lot going for him in Scripture. He was wealthy. He was blessed by God. He was chosen to be the father of a nation that God promised to favor.

There was one issue, though. For Abraham to father a nation, he had to first father a child. But he and his wife, Sarah, could not get pregnant. I can only imagine the hurt and frustration that caused.

As a pastor, I have performed many baby dedications in worship services at our church. They are always times of celebration and happiness. The parents are over-the-top excited to show their newborn babies off to the congregation and also extremely nervous that a public spit-up or tantrum might occur. The grandparent paparazzi, as I refer to them, are in the front rows taking pictures.

It's a special day as parents dedicate the children God has given them and promise in front of the church to raise those children in a way that honors the Lord.

But it's a sad day, too, because while we are celebrating babies being born and new families being formed, it's a reminder to some people of what they *don't* have. God has yet to bless them with a child. They want to start a family, but God hasn't allowed it yet for some reason.

It's painful.

It's frustrating.

It's sad.

I've counseled plenty of couples facing this struggle, and it can cause strain in the relationship. It can also cause bitterness toward God if they're not careful.

When I read Abraham and Sarah's story, this is where I think they were. God had promised them a child, but he was not delivering. Every day that went by was another day of disappointment and a dream unfulfilled.

Finally, they got tired of waiting. God wasn't coming through on their timetable. He must have forgotten them or gone back on his promise. They decided to take the situation into their own hands.

God doesn't see their pain.

He must not be watching over them like he promised.

We'll just do what we need to do, they thought.

Sarah went to Abraham and said, "The LORD has kept me

from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her” (16:2).

Problem solved, right? Hardly. Instead, it was problem *started*. This is usually how it works when we take things into our own hands.

Things went bad almost as soon as Hagar learned she was pregnant. Sarah became jealous and bitter toward Hagar. The Bible says she “dealt harshly” with Hagar (verse 6, ESV).

Hagar was just a servant. She had no real rights. She was simply doing what her master told her to do. Now she was in trouble, even despised, for it.

She had no one to plead her case to.

She had no one to turn to.

She had nowhere to go.

So, she ran away.

Hagar ran into the desert to get away from Sarah and from her situation. She had been treated unjustly and was a broken woman.

She was tired.

She was alone.

I can’t imagine the pain she was in. I can’t imagine the sense of hopelessness, the heartache, the grief. I bet she thought that no one cared and that God had forgotten her.

It was in this moment of brokenness and despair that an angel of the Lord appeared to her and told her to go back and submit to Abraham and Sarah. The angel promised that Hagar would have a son and that he would have offspring too numerous to count.

God revealed himself to her. Listen to her response: “She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: ‘You are the God who sees me,’ for she said, ‘I have now seen the One who sees me’” (verse 13).

In that moment, Hagar gave God a new name. I’ve never

thought of naming God. It seems above my pay grade. But Hagar used this amazing moment to name God El Roi—“the God who sees.”

What Hagar could say of God we can also say of him. He is the God who sees. He sees what we’re running from, what has us down.

Is it a broken relationship?

Is it abuse from your past?

Is it a secret sin you’re struggling with?

Is it that the bills are piling up and you don’t know when relief is going to come?

Is it a miscarriage?

Or the inability to get pregnant?

Is it an addiction?

Is it an illness or injury?

Is it the death of a loved one?

God sees. He sees what we are going through, and it matters to him. This is why Peter told Christians, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

BOTTLED TEARS

There is a Bible verse I’ve read many times that took on a new meaning for me after I learned of Zac’s death. I’ve thought often about how it relates to his wife, Kelly.

You keep track of all my sorrows.

You have collected all my tears in your bottle. (Psalm 56:8,
NLT)

I’ve been a pastor long enough to know that when tragedy strikes and someone is experiencing grief and heartache, there’s nothing anyone can say to make things better. We want to say

something because it's human nature. We love our friends. We don't want them to hurt. We want them to know God has not forgotten them.

But saying something isn't usually the answer. Kelly doesn't need me or anyone else to tell her anything. I bet that no matter what has you down or is causing you to question whether God really sees you, someone telling you something isn't going to help you either.

Maybe, though, painting a word picture would help. This is what the psalmist was doing.

Those tears you are crying—God sees them and is keeping every one of them in a bottle.

The continual twisting and turning on your bed—he sees you and knows exactly what is keeping you awake.

I mentioned that the end of *Monsters, Inc.*, holds a surprise. Roz had been working as Mike and Sulley's boss so she could keep her eye on them, but she was actually an undercover agent for the Child Detection Agency. Mike and Sulley thought that they were on their own and that things were out of control, but the whole time, someone with power and authority was "always watching."

Someday you and I, Kelly and Ev, and all who have put their faith in Jesus will receive a surprise ending of how God works everything out. We will realize we were never alone. God was on our side and was working undercover, bringing together plans of which we were completely unaware.

That may help you right now. It may not. Either way, you can be sure of this: God is a God who sees. He sees you.

And I promise he *cares*.