

# Slow Burn



# Slow Burn

*The Work and Wonder of the Wait*

DAWNCHERÉ WILKERSON



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*Slow Burn*

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GOD,

Your faithfulness on this journey has swept me off my feet.

The pain never stayed.

Your grace has inhabited my heart. Before I hear a heart-beat and before I hold them close, I want you to know you will always be my heart. You will always be my source. I can go without others but you I can't go a day without.

You are my promise.

My reward.

My peace and completion.

My joy and friend.

So real to me is your presence. I can't go a day without you.

I want what YOU want. With ALL my heart. That is my request.

I want my life to glorify the name of JESUS.<sup>a</sup>

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a. See appendix for the handwritten journal entry.



*This book is dedicated to:  
Wyatt, Wilde, Waylon, and Wolfgang.*

*Before your life began.  
Before it was your time.  
You were already mine.<sup>b</sup>*

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b. See appendix for the handwritten journal entry.





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CHAPTER 1

## Will You Live in the Wait?

The table is set and the candles will soon be lit.

Any moment now, my extended family members will burst through the door to welcoming embraces and unspeakable joy after their long flights to Miami. My husband, Rich, just got home with a chocolate cake from the bakery down the street. My best friend from college is in the kitchen, arranging sunflowers in table vases with care. Music fills the house as my kids, Wyatt, Wilde, and Waylon (ranging from ages three to six), race around the dinner table with their scooters like it's the Indy 500.

I've found a quiet place in the front seat of my minivan after returning home from errands, and it feels like the perfect cocoon for reflection before the festivities begin.

I'm turning forty.

I still feel like a kid in many ways, yet I know I'm a long way from the little Cajun girl from a big Louisiana family of six kids. With my dad as both a football coach and a fiery preacher, I spent every weekend watching the pigskin game under Friday night lights and singing hymns on Sunday morning. I'm also far from the seventeen-year-old who recorded pop music in Nashville, dreaming big dreams, and who fell in love with a preacher's son. Now, I sit in my driveway in Miami, decades away from those

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days, in a completely different life and a place I've called home for seventeen years.

On this birthday I have been married to Rich for eighteen years; we have three kids and one on the way. We walked through eight years of infertility, ultimately moving from a desert of barrenness to a life of miraculous fruitfulness—which began far before we had our first child. We have gone from youth pastors to church planters. For almost a decade we have led a gritty, loving church in the heart of Miami.

I've now had four decades of getting to know more and more of the Father's heart and living out his story for me. Like everyone's story, mine has involved years of waiting—waiting for courage and a strong sense of identity, for a calling and marriage, for children and church growth, and the list goes on.

I am sure you have your own list too.

I think of how God used long stretches of time to accomplish what he wanted in and through people in Scripture—and how the number *forty* specifically played a significant role in many of their stories.

The Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years before they entered the promised land. Noah and his family endured forty days on the ark, surrounded by what I'm sure felt like endless waters. Goliath taunted the Israelites for forty days before David courageously confronted him. Jesus fasted and prayed in the desert for forty days before he was tested by the Enemy and then stepped into a new season of power. The disciples shifted from soul-crushing sorrow to awe-filled joy during the forty days between the crucifixion and the ascension.

While the period of forty days or years has a literal meaning, it also can symbolize testing and trials. Moses spent forty years in Egypt and then forty years in the wilderness before God ignited his biggest calling at the burning bush. He'd then embark on yet

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another forty-year period! After all those years, it was only the beginning of a new season for Moses.

Sometimes we are in a place like Moses was, thinking perhaps the key points in our story are behind us, when we're actually in the middle, in between turning-point moments. Moses was in a waiting place, not at the end.

Other times we know full well we're in a waiting place—and it is stretching out, feeling relentlessly long. It seems like we just finished waiting on something else not long ago! Inclined to resent the wait, we can assume it is a boring, random part of our lives to trudge through.

I operated with this perspective—though I may not have admitted it or even been able to articulate it—until God got a hold of my heart with a game changer.

*The wait is not just a season.*

*The wait is life.*

And then the question became, *Will you live while you wait?*

Maybe today you are in the middle, in between the “major” moments of your life. What are you waiting on? Do you question whether it is too late for God to do it?

And do you wonder if there is something worthwhile that can happen until then—even now?

## His Best Work on Our Souls

Humans do not instinctively wait well. We tend to buck against it, even hate it. Entire industries have been created just to shorten our waits. Distractions are welcome if they'll somehow bring our desired outcome more quickly; many of us just scroll until the time miraculously passes. We assume there is no value in waiting, and, over time, we feel the wait wearing us down.

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Years ago I hit a point when I decided the blessings I longed for would never come. Today I'm living in a season defined by those blessings. I sit squeezed into the front seat of my minivan, my stomach expanding each day with the life within me. It's taken me forty years to reach this season of carrying our miracle baby boy—and I can see now it did not come a moment too soon.

God had more forming work to do in me.

And God's forming work takes time. *A lot* of time.

Ronald Rolheiser offered a fascinating picture of this in his book *The Holy Longing*. Discussing how human faces develop distinctive features, he explained how French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre believed that the beauty of a newborn's face relies primarily on genes. "But, with each hour, day, and year of its life, this changes and . . . culminates at age forty when, finally, a person has the essential lines of a face." At that point a face displays "individuality, character, and a beauty-beyond-genes."

How we choose to live day after day, year after year, makes us who we are, and it's written all over our faces.

Rolheiser concluded,

What is important about all of this is what, in the end, forms our faces. Up until age forty, genetic endowment is dominant, and that is why, up until that age, we can be selfish and still look beautiful. From then onward, though, we look like what we believe in. If I am anxious, selfish, petty, bitter, narrow, and self-centered, my face will show it. Conversely, if I am warm, gracious, humble, and other-centered, my face will also show it. A scary thought; there can be no poker faces after forty.<sup>1</sup>

Development never comes overnight. It takes a lifetime.

If I'd had my first child at the time of my choosing, I wouldn't have half the perspective I hold now. What I gained in the wait has

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made all the difference in my ability to steward this season and has given me strength to be patient in the way I need to be now.

God wasn't punishing me; he was preparing me.

And so it is in every sphere of my life.

Over the years I often have felt behind, like life had given me a deadline I couldn't ever meet. Unexpected delays, goals pushed back, and then last-minute sprints to the finish line. Fashionably late is still a thing, right? I sure hope so.

Even now, I had planned to turn this manuscript in months ago. But if I had, I would not have been able to share this moment in the minivan, where I'm surveying the big picture of my journey thus far, amazed at what only God could have orchestrated.

He finishes what he starts with unique and supernatural precision if we will wait on him. And so I'm not "behind"; I'm existing in his timeline. He is faithfully leading and creating the story he wants to tell. I am in the middle of it, and his presence right here makes me smile.

What is the wait worth? I'm reminded of an old rumored story about Pablo Picasso, when a woman approached him at a café.

[She] asked him to scribble something on a napkin, and said she would be happy to pay whatever he felt it was worth. Picasso complied and then said, "That will be \$10,000."

"But you did that in thirty seconds," the astonished woman replied.

"No," Picasso said. "It has taken me forty years to do that."<sup>2</sup>

While I am no Picasso, I believe every life creates priceless art from the human experience. It took me forty years to write this book. This book is my life. And what is the cost of having

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something worth writing about? Forty years of testing, waiting, and holding on to a promise that will truly be fulfilled only in eternity, when I'll be face-to-face with my Creator and have no pain, no tears, and endless peace.

No more waiting is what I'm still waiting on.

I'm decades into my story, and yet it's not the end; it's the middle. The "in-between."

The same can be said of you, no matter what age you are. If you know Jesus, you are on the same journey I am, heading for the true forever home, not there yet but well on our way. This book is for anyone who has struggled in the wait or might say the "in-between" feels like a stuck place.

But the amazing news is, you aren't stuck; you're living in a miracle. Right here, right now.

Again, waiting is not part of life. Waiting is life. The issue of your earthly journey is not, *When will I no longer have to wait?* It's, *Who am I becoming in the wait?*

It is not about the cards you have been dealt. It's about the cards you surrender.

When you surrender to God day after day in the wait, you experience inner transformation—the kind that prepares you for what comes next. In fact, I believe that "what comes next" can't be fully realized or experienced unless we are deeply reshaped first.

This played out in David's life. Samuel anointed him as the next king when David was only a boy; it took many years for it to become a reality. Throughout the wait God formed David through many slow-burn circumstances, from leading a group of outcasts to become victorious in battle to living on the run as King Saul obsessively hunted him. David developed a deep faith that he brought into the large calling of ruling Israel. The wait humbled him, strengthened his discernment, tested his heart, and trained him to rely fully on God.

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David couldn't have known all that God was doing in him at the time. Only years later could he look back and see the effects of daily communion with God.

As a man after God's heart, David repeatedly wrote throughout the Psalms, "I will wait on you, Lord." He waited on God

- for deliverance
- for direction
- for forgiveness
- for refreshing
- for healing
- for vindication
- for confidence

If we want to be people after God's heart, we must be people who wait. He created us to wait on him in every season to find our direction, comfort, strength, healing, revelation, joy, and hope. Our daily waiting is where we will find our daily destiny—and where God reshapes us.

As Charles Swindoll once put it, "We don't like waiting, but that's when God does some of His best work on our souls."<sup>3</sup>

## Our Best Offering to Him

The candles on my table will burn slowly throughout the entirety of my birthday dinner this evening, illuminating the night, then reach their end with a last breath of smoke.

We often think our lives will culminate to a mighty bonfire or dynamite explosion, but that explosion is eternity that awaits. Here on earth our lives are a constant, steady slow burn of faith through the wait.

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Of course, we typically live more like we are following the words of a talent agent: “It’s not about what you’re doing now; it’s about what’s next.” The goalposts keep moving, so when we reach a finish line, we find we are waiting again. At that point, the state of our heart can be summed up in the joke, “I had my patience tested, and I’m negative.”

If we are meant to embrace the wait, *what do we do* while we wait—especially when it seems we are just burning time?

Consider the wisdom we can glean from the ancient practice of burning incense.

The word *incense* comes from the Latin word *incendere*, which simply means “to burn.”<sup>4</sup> God instructed Moses to have Aaron burn incense on the tabernacle altar, placing the incense near a heat source so it could smolder over an extended amount of time. Moses and Aaron set their incense on coals, and when they did, it released an aroma that filled the tabernacle.

God wanted them to do this every single morning and night. This twice-a-day offering the priests presented on behalf of the Israelites was an act of worship. A perfumer provided the ingredients of the incense, and the rising smoke represented the people’s prayers to God. The fragrant sacrifice was to be “salted and pure and sacred,” just like our very lives (Exodus 30:35 NIV).

Every human life is like a vapor, here today and gone tomorrow. God invites us to make our lives an act of worship, relying on him as our heat source to produce rising smoke. We are to surrender to him morning and night and for all the extended time in between.

As we do, the smoldering effect leaves a scent for our Father, one that delights his heart and draws the lost to him with the “aroma of Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:15). It’s also a fragrance that reminds us of our surrender to him as our source.

Humans are excellent at distinguishing different scents.

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Recent studies have shown we're capable of identifying a trillion different aromas!<sup>5</sup> What we smell can influence our thoughts and be linked with past moments. The scent of honeysuckle sends me to my backyard in Louisiana, Cajun spice reminds me of high school crawfish boils, and a perfume I used in the first year of dating Rich takes me back to our sweet early moments together. Smell and emotion are stored as one memory, tied deeply together.

God told the Israelites to use a specific sacred blend of incense for worship. He wanted his people to associate a scent with their fragrant offerings because they *needed a reminder* to remain in worship or return to it. He knew that, in the daily wait of life, they would forget their source and their purpose. They'd trade out the slow burn, which pointed to all that is sacred, for a flash in the pan, which was easy but empty.

God knows that you and I operate the same way today.

How quickly we forget him in the wait! How often we bring our best offering each morning and night to everyone *but* God. We spend our lives on meaningless dreams and dead-end pursuits.

We rush ahead instead of waiting on God.

Tom Petty said it best: "The waiting is the hardest part. Every day you get one more yard. You take it on faith, you take it to the heart. The waiting is the hardest part."<sup>6</sup>

But perhaps the hardest is the holiest.

## The Constant, Steady, Slow Burn of Faith

"If the Lord Jehovah makes us wait, let us do so with our whole hearts; for blessed are all they that wait for Him," wrote Charles Spurgeon. "He is worth waiting for. The waiting itself is beneficial to us: it tries faith, exercises patience, trains submission, and endears the blessing when it comes."<sup>7</sup>

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Wholehearted waiting. What a thought. Research has shown that driving while distracted on your phone slows down your journey and inhibits the flow of traffic.<sup>8</sup> So it is when we wait half-heartedly. We are distracted by the future we long for and dissatisfied with our present reality, so our pace becomes stagnant and our flow is stifled.

Wholehearted pursuits yield the greatest harvests.

There were seasons when God's people didn't just wait half-heartedly; they forgot all he had done and offered their incense to false gods. They "went after worthlessness, and became worthless" (Jeremiah 2:5).

The same struggle of the heart remains in our culture today. We are too busy waiting on everything but God. And he is the only one worth waiting on.

God once told his wandering people how they would later give him honor: "In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations" (Malachi 1:11 NIV).

When Jesus walked the earth, he "gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:2). He became a fragrant offering so our lives could become an offering too—so we could do what Paul described in Romans 12:1: "In view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (NIV).

And we know the praise will continue in heaven. We read in Revelation, "The smoke of the incense, mixed with the prayers of God's holy people, ascended up to God from the altar" (8:4 NLT).

He is forever worthy of all we can bring him.

So again: What do we do while we wait, when it seems we are just burning time?

We live like David, who told God, "Every morning I lay out

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the pieces of my life on the altar and wait for your fire to fall upon my heart,” and, “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!” (Psalm 5:3 TPT; 141:2).

Making our lives a fragrant offering means trusting God wholeheartedly in the slow burn. We choose to steward our thoughts, motivations, conversations, and worship in the wait.

Will there be moments when that feels impossible? Of course. We are *human*; our emotions and limited perspectives can lead us to simply cope however we can and forget coming to God altogether. But he knows this. He understands our struggle. He will meet us where we are and help us.

When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, he showed his heart for his people. “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:7–8 NIV).

Look at his extraordinary love in action: “I have *seen* your misery, I have *heard* your cries, I’m *concerned* about your suffering, and I have *come* to rescue you.”

He’s saying the same to his children today.

I first truly encountered the love of God as a teenager when he gave me the strength to step through my fear. The freedom I experienced was unlike anything I had ever known. I’ll tell you all about it later in our journey together. And how, throughout the years since, he has proven himself faithful time and time again, meeting me in my struggle, pouring out love, and empowering me for every next step.

I know he’ll do the same for you, too, as you open up more of your life to him in the wait.

## A Lifetime of Discovering His Heart

My table for tonight is set with special names embroidered on each napkin, the treasured people who will fill the seats. The permanence of the gesture hints at their permanent place in my life, including the love of my life, the best friend from college in Tennessee, and the family from Louisiana. They have walked with me through the wildernesses of waiting and celebrated on the mountaintops of my journey, again and again, as is the cycle of life.

One special seat at the table tonight has a napkin with the name of a person I haven't met yet. "Wolf" it reads in goldenrod thread, my fourth child, who is already loved and welcomed as we wait for his arrival. I'm waiting throughout this forty-week journey to see this boy's face, and once I do, I'll patiently wait as the purpose of God continues to faithfully unravel in all our lives moment by moment, year by year. I will keep my hands open to him and discover who he wants us to become throughout the wait.

It is not a single moment of trust but a lifetime.

Friends have jokingly reminded me that I'm "over the hill" this week, the symbolic midway mark of the journey and life expectancy. To me, the journey to year forty has felt much more like climbing a mountain than gliding over a hill. Either way, as I look back at God's loving-kindness to me, I'm choosing to pitch a tent right here and make an altar. I want to stay in awe of the God who has brought me this far. I will make these pages a memorial stone to my faithful Father and Friend.

Would you like to join me in your own way as we step forward together? Maybe you'll grab a journal to write out how God meets you in the wait or find a friend to process what he's stirring in you both throughout each chapter ahead.

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May all who pass by hear our testimony of his goodness in the wait.

The fire of our lives will one day be extinguished, but when the fire fades, may the fragrance remain. And may the first directive in Exodus be the story of all history—that “incense will burn regularly before the LORD for the generations to come” (30:8 NIV).

I know that until that point there are more mountains ahead for us. I for one want to keep returning to the same altar again and again to surrender the rest of the journey home. If you join me, you’ll find what I have so far: There will be work, and there will be wonder.

Our work will be coming to God and trusting. The wonder will be sensing his joy.

Our work will be surrendering. The wonder will be knowing his faithfulness.

Our work will be giving him our attention. The wonder will be getting glimpses of heaven.

We’re in the wait, you and me—on a pathway to discover the heart of God.

Let’s go see what he’ll show us next.



CHAPTER 2

## Strike a Match

I was driving down a familiar road headed to a familiar office when I heard words that took my breath away.

“Uncle Ro went to be with Jesus last night. His cancer procedure didn’t go as planned.”

My mom’s voice from the phone seemed to echo in the silence that followed. I paused at the stop sign as the Miami sun shone through my windshield, and tears streamed down my face.

Uncle Roosevelt had become family to us when he moved from Manhattan to Louisiana to work with my father when I was nine years old. He quickly became a beloved part of our close-knit “Ragin’ Cajun” family—with six kids—and was known for jovially engaging in epic pillow fights. He was explosively joyful with an iconic laugh, like a staccato hiss that hit again and again in perfect time. And whenever Uncle Ro spoke at our church, he called me up to the front to sing before he shared. The bond between the two of us became so strong over the years that, even after I moved away from Louisiana, he’d call me whenever he was traveling within a few hours of Miami. “Come minister with me at this service, DawnChéré.” It filled my heart every time I joined him.

He and I had been together only months before this devastating moment. I hung up with my mom. I went through the

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motions of driving to my doctor's office while in shock. Thinking back to the last day I'd seen Uncle Ro. Considering his wife and children's great loss.

It was my twenty-fifth birthday, and I had been married for almost four years to the love of my life, Rich. We had long been eager to create a nest of our own and felt ready for our first baby. I had notified my doctor and she had run routine blood tests.

After I was led to an examination room and waited a bit, the doctor marched into the room and, with no preamble, reported, "Your blood tests have come back, and they are irregular. You are going to have trouble having kids." Grabbing a business card out of her white coat and handing it to me, she continued, "Here's an infertility specialist. Make an appointment. They'll take it from here."

I'm usually a very guarded person, but I couldn't stop the tears that suddenly began falling again. I reached out for the card while stammering, "I'm s-sorry, I lost a loved one this morning. That's what the tears are about. I'm fine."

In a dry tone she replied, "I'm sorry for your loss," and strode out.

Feeling I was now in an alternate universe, I left the doctor's office and drove to work, to the office of the church Rich and I worked at, where his parents were lead pastors. In the elevator, I wiped away the last encore of my tears and hit the button to close the elevator door. *So this is twenty-five. Happy birthday.*

Surely the doctor had it wrong—my mother had given birth to six children with no problems. My dad winked at her and she got pregnant. *This isn't my story. I won't let it be,* I told myself. *I'll figure this out.*

Little did I know I was beginning an eight-year journey of waiting that would involve massive personal transformation. I would become a completely different person from that twenty-five-year-old by the time I held my first miracle in my arms.

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Could those eight years of barrenness actually have birthed more in me than any other seemingly fruitful season?

Was that twenty-fifth birthday the embryonic start of a brand-new creation within me, ushering in a deeper strength and grace to have with me the rest of my journey?

Perhaps my twenty-five years on earth had been leading me to this very moment.

### Teach Me, Lord, to Wait

The day I was born, my parents gave me a life scripture. They wanted a promise of God to mark my life and be a handle I could hold on to with faith in every season. They chose Isaiah 40:31: “They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”<sup>c</sup>

Music is the life source of our family; it marks our culture and family bond, so it only made sense that my uncle Teddy Grover wrote a song inspired by the life scripture my parents chose for me. I grew up singing that song again and again—in churches and nursing homes, in my parents’ studio where they wrote and produced music, at family gatherings and in everyday moments. Even now it resounds in my heart like a faithful friend. The simple chorus of Uncle Teddy’s song is Isaiah 40:31 verbatim, and then the last line of the chorus simply says, “Teach me, Lord, to wait.”

Have you ever prayed a prayer without knowing it?

I look back on the thousands of times I sang that song over the years and can see the power of my prayer with twenty-twenty

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c. See appendix for the handwritten journal entry.

## STRIKE A MATCH

vision. The declaration of faith I sang was a prophetic statement for my life journey.

I asked God to teach me to wait. And he did.

In a sense, my life journey is no different from yours. You know about struggling with the tension of earth and eternity, present and future, pause and press. You don't need to have Isaiah 40:31 as a life verse or a song about it from your upbringing to know about waiting. You've endured much over arduously long stretches of time. You are living it now.

Maybe for you it's the healing process of a bodily injury or relational wound.

The surgery and chemo you're persevering through and wondering if it will be effective.

The dream job that has yet to open up or the life partner you've not yet found.

It could be postdivorce stability or relief from grief you're longing for.

Or the clear leading about a big life change and what you are meant to do next.

Waiting is inescapable.

And while we might feel like a whole lot of nothing is going on in a slow burn, we couldn't be more wrong.

There most definitely is something going on.

## This Is Where You Can Transform

My husband, Rich, recently started using a sauna, and he could be a sales rep the way he preaches its benefits. I, unfortunately, am not a fan. Yes, I have heard the positive effects dry heat can have on my health—lowering blood pressure and reducing the risk of stroke, cardiovascular disease, and serious heart conditions. It can

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decrease cortisol levels and chronic pain, it can detoxify the body, and it can improve sleep and respiratory function.<sup>1</sup> Even though I know *all of that*, I still just don't like waiting in the stinking heat.

But I will not deny how powerful the effects of heat are—or how this reality deepens the imagery of a slow burn.

The heat of life transforms us. Like bread in the oven or pottery in the kiln, like fruit becoming preserves or logs of wood becoming embers—we are changed moment by moment into what seemed impossible before we encountered the heat.

The heat of life expands us. Thermal expansion is the increased molecular movement that occurs in substances when they're heated. The pressure in car tires rises along with the temperature because heat makes the air in them expand. You can't see the change happening at the molecular level, but the change is indeed happening.

Think of how incense alone can't fill a room with a scent; it's just a tiny lump of granular spice. But when you place it on a heat source, its scent can reach every corner of a space.

The same thing happens with the little offering you put on the altar. When it rests on the heat God supplies, it supernaturally expands beyond your own ability and creates lasting, powerful impact. Day and night, the little you hold as you wait is transformed as you choose to lay it on the altar.

The heat of God reshapes, refines, and empowers us.

The heat of the world causes pain and comes at us from all different directions.

But what I know about God is that whether we're dealing with divorce, heartbreak, sickness, loneliness, betrayal, or confusion, he will use our pain to serve his purpose. We always can keep trusting him to do that.

When we don't trust him, though, our pain can lead us to waste the wait. To wander through it. Or to worry through it.

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People often live however they want to in a season of singleness, glorifying selfish pursuits and individual endeavors, then think they can jump into marriage with ease. They'll suddenly become the new person they'll need to be for the new season.

Cue the wrong-answer sound from *The Price Is Right*.

The waiting was meant to be a prep season.

As John Ortberg said, "Biblically, waiting is not just something we have to do until we get what we want. Waiting is part of the process of becoming what God wants us to be."<sup>2</sup>

A healthy marriage is made up of healthy individuals. You may never have had a long, committed relationship, but if you prepare your character for one, you'll be more ready than you might expect. The same goes for having a child. Prepare your character for parenting, and you'll become more ready than you once were.

The training ground for your *next* is right here, where you are today. The question is, What do you want to do with it?

Rich and I once rented a home with a cracked ceiling that leaked. After examining it, a repairman said the whole AC system needed to be replaced. But our landlord insisted on simply painting over the cracks.

Can you guess where this story is going?

A while later, when my brother was staying with us, he was lying in bed when the entire ceiling caved in and fell on top of him. My poor brother. Thankfully he was okay, but there certainly was no hiding the need for renovation any longer. While the paint job had made it look great on the outside, it was decaying on the inside. And it was only a matter of time before that became obvious.

None of us wants to drift toward deterioration, but that's where neglecting our inner life will leave us. In every day of the wait, our choices will dictate our development.

Meanwhile the Spirit is calling, *Draw near. Open yourself to me. Allow me to come renovate your heart.*

## The Power of Slowness

Do you remember the Aesop's fable "The Tortoise and the Hare"?

The hare is fast and boastful. The tortoise is slow but hard-working, committed to finishing what he starts. They agree to a race, and the hare takes off faster than lightning. He gets so far ahead that he even decides to take a nap. Undaunted by being left in the dust, the tortoise continues on the path, slow yet persistent. When the hare wakes up after oversleeping, he rushes forward only to see the tortoise cross the finish line ahead of him.

Slow and steady wins the race.

Patience and focus beat haste and impulsiveness.

When we find ourselves resenting the slowness of the wait, we can look around and find many reminders that worthwhile things take time.

It is not overnight that muscles develop in our bodies, or an artist paints a masterpiece, or a tiny tree expands into a fortress.

Crops grow for years before they produce fruit. Every step between cultivating the soil and bringing in the harvest requires patience, perseverance, and delayed gratification.

Whenever people create positive generational shifts, grow communities, or develop city infrastructures, it takes years, if not decades, of building—if they do it right.

The slowness isn't just the common factor here; it is one of the *key* factors.

In college I took a class on ornamental horticulture and learned about the century plant. It is small, about the size of a bush, and lives ten to thirty years at that exact size. Then there's

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a point when the plant starts to grow and, within a month, it stretches to twenty-eight feet tall. It gets massive!

For the first few decades, you could look at this plant and assume it would always stay that small. But you wouldn't know about the seed God had placed in it for the appointed time.

Perhaps you look at yourself and size yourself up, like I do. I probably will always be this way, fighting off thoughts like, *I'm not smart enough or pretty enough. I don't have the right education, or the right family, or enough money*—on and on. Whatever limits you see in yourself, remember, you don't know what seed God has planted in you. Have faith and it will come to fruition over time.

How many people would have looked at Jesus in his first phases of life and assumed they had him pegged? No one could have known all that God had in store. Jesus wasn't born to be a carpenter, and yet he spent decades working as one. It was preparing him.

Think of it: He spent *thirty years* living a quiet life before he began his ministry, choosing faithfulness in small ways moment after moment, day after day.

If God designed his own life on earth to be a slow burn, why wouldn't ours be?

And if Jesus embraced it, why shouldn't we do the same?

## An Invitation of a Lifetime

I started this chapter telling you about the heartache of my twenty-fifth birthday. I didn't know it, but I was striking a match that day.

I was beginning a slow-burn wait that ultimately birthed more in me than any other seemingly fruitful season. It was the

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start of a brand-new creation in me that gave me more strength and grace for the rest of my journey.

Today, you could be in a place of heartache yourself. Even so, is it possible this is the time a brand-new creation will begin in you too?

Maybe you feel like the world is closing in on you. You could be completely at a loss of what to do next. Or perhaps you feel desperately stuck, stifled in the limitations of your current season. Any joy and zest for life seems out of reach.

While all those feelings are real, the story they're telling isn't true. Because it isn't the whole story.

God is the Author of your life, and he has goodness ahead for you. There's a story he wants to tell through you, and he isn't waiting to write it. He's writing it as you wait. Right here, right now.

God is alive, at work, and with you. He has given you an eternal soul, one that he can speak to. And the eyes of your soul can determine the story you tell yourself about your life, who you are, and what God can do.

Ask him to speak to you about where to set your eyes moving forward and to lead you into his will for you. Go ahead and dream about how he might change you in the wait.

I started as a girl overwhelmed with the medical system and afraid to advocate for myself. I tried to control the narrative and the timing. And I insisted on isolating myself from others.

But then I came to realize that God knew me better than I knew myself. I developed an honesty with him, and I dug my trust into his foundation with reckless abandon. I gained faith as I prayed with others and for others. I leaned into vulnerability, which created deep friendships and long-lasting support. And eventually the fighter in me rose up in a strength that was not my own and seized the day.

There was a deep development happening in me every single day of my journey. As I reflect, I wouldn't take back one

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moment—despite all the tears, failures, questions, anger, and disillusionment—because of who I became through it. When I allowed God to renew my mind, he did so much more in me than I thought possible. I found myself having a firm confidence that I was in God’s will even though I was completely unable to see the outcome ahead.

There is a promised payoff for your trust in the wait. You will develop a strength, wisdom, and perseverance that will permeate every part of your life. More than anything, you will come to know God’s faithfulness and character more deeply and experience his love like never before.

A season of waiting is one of the greatest invitations you will have in life. God wants to give you a pace and perspective that only come from the wait; he’ll give you time to reflect, renew, and then refocus. I believe you are in your finest hour because God is close, and I have great expectation for all he desires to do in your life from the inside out.

Will you believe that the “right life for you” is delayed or that you are walking in your destiny right now?

Are you in defeat or divine design?

Are you in weakness or strength?

Are you a victim or a victor?

Is this season a burden or a blessing?

If you can’t answer with certainty today, that’s okay. God will grow you and build certainty in you. He will grow all kinds of things in you.

Your *next* depends on how you steward your *now*.

Strike the match and start the slow burn.

This might be the most powerful moment of your journey so far.

YOUR NEXT

DEPENDS ON HOW

YOU STEWARD

YOUR NOW.



CHAPTER 3

## Eye to Eye

The first time I held my oldest son is a moment I will never forget.

I had waited eight years to see this face, a mystery that had brought delight with each day getting closer to his birth. During delivery, when I heard his first loud baby cry, I laughed. It was a rapture of joy beyond my belief.

“He’s a legend!” Rich shouted several times as Wyatt continued to exercise his lungs.

He was crying as they brought him to me, but when he heard my voice, he stopped. We knew each other. I kissed his face several times and told him I loved him.

There he was, healthy, shockingly blond, and immediately the very beat of our hearts.

I suddenly had a new hand to hold, a new face to kiss, a new voice to know, and a new laugh to miss. He would never outgrow my waiting arms.

That first night in the hospital, my husband held our son on his chest in the darkness, tears streaming down his face. “Babe, what is he doing to me?” he whispered. “This is changing everything. I love him so much.”

At one point a nurse told me Wyatt could see only eight

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inches in front of him. I learned that as I fed him it was the perfect distance from my face to his for him to see me. For the first few weeks, he really didn't need to see anything beyond his mother's face. Eye to eye, I cared for him, moment after moment.

You and I have a Father who longs to be eye to eye caring for us, moment after moment.

We are the children of the one who *is love*.

God so loved the world that he sent his son to stand eye to eye with us. He came to us. God didn't send him as an ethereal cloud, a majestic being, or an angel. He sent flesh and blood to look eye to eye.

He comes to where you are today:

In the unspoken loneliness you feel while trusting him with the desires of your heart.

In the complicated relationships that weigh you down no matter how hard you try to rise above.

In the unexpected struggle to find fulfillment and contentment.

In the war room of your faith as you continue to believe for a miracle or grapple with the finality of loss.

Where are you and what do you see?

Maybe you feel forgotten or far away from God, though he is always tenderly mindful of you, offering a loving assurance like no other.

He has never looked away.

## His Eyes Are on You

Years ago my mother, my sister, and I were at a conference on the West Coast. We were only attending, not stepping onto the stage to speak, and enjoying just being in the faith-filled room. In one



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of the sessions, the host suddenly started talking about infertility and the prayer for healing, then asked every woman who was walking through infertility to stand.

My heart started to race, and I clenched my sister's jeans.

"I don't want to stand. I don't want anyone to pray for me. This is not helping me!" I pleaded.

But I had already shared my story publicly a few years earlier, so I knew I didn't really have a choice.

At the time I was feeling stable in the wait, not overcome with heartache and weariness, but this moment blindsided me. It came out of nowhere and immediately flipped my emotions. My heart wasn't ready for the instant deep dive, and it shocked my soul.

I stood, along with many other women in the wait, and received the prayer. I imagine it helped many women feel seen and supported. I also imagine there were others who did not stand because it exposed a place in them too tender and deep to share.

I have come to a place of sensitivity for people in the wait. Many times I have chosen to sit quietly instead of standing, knowing that God knows my heart and his eyes are the only eyes I need to feel on me.

Whatever we make public is still personal. Whatever we choose to share is still sacred. And as we wait, we must keep inhabiting that personal, sacred space with grace when unexpected moments surface.

You are allowed to have privacy, wherever you are on your journey. Sometimes only knowing that God knows is enough. And however healed you may be, hold on to the reality that the most tender parts of you are sacred and protected.

You are seen.

His eyes are on you.



## He's Reaching Out to You

Remember that we are, after all, talking about the eyes of the Almighty. They hold much power. In Revelation, John said Jesus' eyes were "like a flame of fire" (19:12). His eyes can see deep into our souls with a purifying, refining fire. They cause conviction and transformation of the heart, as they did with Peter after his denial.

The eyes of Jesus were never too busy to spot the outcast or those on the periphery of the immediate objective. He saw Martha in her hurry, Nathaniel under the fig tree, and perceived the motivations of his critics, discerning their hearts from afar.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus employed his sight as he healed the deaf and mute man, looking up to heaven before the miracle transpired. He looked at a crowd with compassion, knowing they were wandering helpless and blind. And his gaze was full of love as he looked at the rich young ruler, a man deceived by his own self-righteousness and lost in his search for truth.<sup>2</sup>

Eighteen years ago, when Rich and I had been married only a few months and were starting the adventure of our life, I moved from Tennessee to Miami. I am directionally challenged in a small town, let alone a metropolis, so my first solo trip to South Beach was memorable to say the least.

In the middle of the August heat, I ran out of gas in a neighborhood I had never been in; I couldn't even recall how I got there. Rich was unavailable so, in a panic, I called my friend David, who worked on South Beach. In a rush I explained my predicament, then sputtered, "I don't know what to do! Would you be able to help me?"

"Where are you?" he asked.

"I don't know!" I answered with urgency. "All I see is this big white building with strange circle windows."

“I know exactly where you are,” he replied, to my relief. “Hang tight and I’ll be there soon.”

Thank God for good friends.

I have good news: Our God is better than a good friend. You may be so lost that you can’t even describe your surroundings—but all you need to do is admit that you’re lost and he will come running. It’s what he did through Jesus; we were lost, so he came to us.

God has a perfect track record. He always shows up. He’ll leave the ninety-nine sheep to rescue the one wandering. As we just saw in Scripture, time after time in Jesus’ life on earth, he sought out the ones in need.

His eyes keep careful watch over you now, interceding for you at the right hand of the Father, omniscient and invested in your every moment.

In the slow burn, you are seen and you are known.

## Yes, He’ll Come to You Even *There*

There may be days when you hear all this and think, *Maybe God can see me and know me. But my life is a wreck right now. My story isn’t pretty. I am too much of a mess for anyone to reach me.*

And if you listen closely, you might hear God reply, *Try me.*

*Well, I’m feeling really hopeless, you might say. I’m in the darkest place of my life.*

That’s how the woman with the issue of blood felt.<sup>3</sup> She was suffering with a disease as well as a sense of futility. There is nothing more discouraging than nothing working—to try everything and see everything fail. Today if you feel helpless, God comes to you where you are.

Maybe you’d tell God instead, *I’m in a dead-end place that*

*feels wrong. I'm at a loss about how to change or who I'm supposed to be.*

If you had asked Peter, "Who are you?" he would have said, "Are you kidding me? Like I have a choice. Generation after generation, my people have been fishermen. It's not like there's a job fair around here. I'm just a fisherman; that is all I'll ever do."

Then Jesus came to Peter and spoke to his limitation. Talk about lifting the ceiling off his life! It's as if Jesus was speaking to Peter's heart, saying "You have no idea yet who you will become. I'm telling you, you will be a *fisher of men*."<sup>4</sup> Today, if you feel stuck and you don't know what's next, God comes to where you are.

*I'm drowning in the weight of shame, you might say. I've blown it so many times and there's no excuse for where I am at in my life at this point.*

The woman at the well was debilitated by shame, and the first words Jesus said to her revealed his interest in her quality of life. Using the powerful metaphor of water, he let her know he could replenish her dehydrated soul.<sup>5</sup> So many of us find ourselves here. If that's you today, he comes to you right where you are.

*My life is chaos, you might say.*

When the disciples were on a boat in a storm at night, feeling beaten, the violent wind and waves threatened to overcome them. They could barely see anything before their eyes, let alone the possibility of survival. But Jesus walked on water to get to them and protect them.<sup>6</sup> However chaotic your life might be today, he comes to where you are.

*I'm haunted by my trauma, you might say. Its grip on me is unrelenting and it's controlling my life.*

There once was a man who was bound by darkness; he was possessed by a demon and living among tombs. Jesus came to him in his torment and misery.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes we forget that whenever

the Light goes eye to eye with the darkness, the Light always overtakes it. You may be living among the tombs of your past, your torment, your pain. If you are, he comes to where you are.

There is no place he won't go to reach you, the child he loves. He proved that when he came to earth as man, meeting people in their messes, connecting directly to their need. He came not to a palace but to a stable. Not to royalty but to a teenage virgin. Not as a king but as a servant.

He is right there with you as you read these words, ready to look you in the eyes and say, *You are not alone.*

## He Will Meet Your Deepest Needs

Jesus not only comes to where you are; he also comes as *who you need.*

While I love my husband deeply, I can't always sense what his heart needs. No matter how many years we spend with someone, we can never fully know the depths and reach of their thoughts and desires.

But does this stop me from thinking I know what Rich is trying to say in any given conversation? No. It's a big joke in our home that I'm the incorrigible interrupter. If Rich even slightly pauses while speaking, I'll feel confident I know exactly where he's headed, so I'll try to help him out and finish his sentences. Besides annoying Rich like crazy, it honestly gets hysterical how off I am at times. For instance, at a restaurant I'll look at him and think, *He wants to leave*, when it turns out he's thinking, *I want dessert.*

A version of this plays out with my kids too; I can't always tell what they need.

Now, they've got three different cries—hungry, sleepy, dirty diaper—and those I've got down cold.

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Hungry is really *hangry*; the sound here is like a low guttural growl.

Sleepy is a full-on meltdown. Bottom lip out, eyebrows furrowed, tears streaming. *You blew it, Mom. I'm exhausted, so now I refuse to sleep.*

Dirty diaper is a ticked-off shout, full volume. *Hello! I can't walk myself to the changing table. Going to need your legs, Mom!*

But sometimes they do a new thing, and I have no idea what they want. What's crazy is, I will pay such close attention and try my hardest to read them right and still get it wrong.

News flash: Your God will not get it wrong. He doesn't have to play a guessing game with you. He knows what you need!

When he sees you in need, he will show up. Always.

And when he shows up, he won't be just a complacent bystander. He will empower you and supply you. He will encourage you and cheer you on.

The problem is this: What we need is not always what we want. So while God knows our need, we do not.

What you want is a prophetic word from the stage; what you need is to shut yourself away and hear him speak.

What you want is twenty-year vision; what you need is to read your Bible today.

What you want is a big position leading many; what you need is to serve where you are. What you want is a deep, intimate relationship; what you need is a whole and healed heart.

What you want is a new job; what you need is a new attitude.

God came to humanity in a way that met their true need. What the people wanted was a flashy king on an earthly throne; what they needed was a Savior who could show them God's heart.

He knew they needed not only to receive forgiveness for their sins but also to see his perfect love within a human so that we,

too, could love with his love. And he knows the same is true for you and me.

## Seeing All That You Can

When he comes to us and we look at him, what do we see?

If it's not clear, we can let Scripture guide us. It describes God in human terms, making references to things we can grasp, even though God's nature goes beyond what our minds can fathom.

He is the sun, the light, the day, and the morning star. He is fire, a torch, a fountain, and a rock. He's a shield, a hiding place, a shadow, and a temple. An eagle, a lion, and a hen.

All of creation indeed sings of his glory!

Scripture also refers to God as the Bridegroom and a husband. He's a shepherd, a potter, and a physician. A king and a man of war. He is the Lord, mighty in power!

We also see our own human emotions and abilities mirrored in descriptions of him. We read that he is knowing, seeing, and remembering; he's smelling and tasting; he's sitting, rising, walking, sleeping, and wiping away tears.

And then there are many names of God, which speak to his personal interactions with humanity and reflect the redemptive story. His names are all paths to our hearts.

The name of the Lord is a strong tower. We can run to it and find shelter.

He's the Healer for our wounds and brokenness.

The Provider for our lack.

A Father to the fatherless and those with father issues.

The Prince of Peace when we are in chaos.

The Lord of light who overcomes the darkness in our lives.

The Deliverer when we are in bondage.

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The Savior when we are stuck helpless in a pit.

We can call him *Jehovah Machsi*, meaning, “the Lord my refuge.”

Or *Jehovah Nissi*, “the Lord my banner.”

Or *Peleh Yo’etz*, “wonderful Counselor.”

Our God is the Alpha and Omega. The first and the last. The beginning and the end. All of this is only a glimpse, a taste, a shadow, an impression of the magnitude of his nature.

This is the God who comes to meet you. He whispers to your heart, *Will you look closer and come to know more of who I am?*

In the slow burn, you come to see more and more of the Savior.

One day shortly after Wyatt was born, I stepped out of my house for a walk for the first time after coming home from the hospital. It had been painful to even sit up after the C-section and I asked my dad to walk around our neighborhood with Wyatt and me as the sun was setting. I had slept so little and spent days in my bedroom, so just getting out of my pajamas and breathing fresh air was rejuvenating.

As I looked around and took in the purple- and pink-laced sky, my heart whispered to me, *There is so much more*. I thought of newborn Wyatt seeing only eight inches in front of him, unaware of the vast landscape beyond that. But his limited sight did not limit reality.

So it is with us. There is so much more beyond our view. Are you willing to believe that there is more than you currently can see in your marriage and your home? In your purpose and across the landscape of your life? Who are we to think that in our short time on the planet, that in our finiteness, we have seen all there is? You live under an open sky. God is all around you.

And he has promised that no eye has seen, nor ear has heard what he has prepared for those that love him.<sup>8</sup>

There are times our sight feels limited like Wyatt’s, only

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seeing eight inches in front of us. I lived in the eight inches for eight years. But even in the eight inches I was eye to eye with God.

If you are in pain, disappointed, or feel rejected, know that a loving God is waiting to help you. Will you choose to focus on the unclear surroundings or the clarity of your Savior? Will you choose to focus on the uncertainty or the closeness of the friend who sticks closer than a brother?

He's not far away from you today. He's eye to eye with you. He's close to you now like he was with the woman who was bleeding, with Peter, with the woman at the well, with the disciples in the storm, and with the tormented man. He came for you. Your life is as significant as every encounter you read in the pages of God's Word.

You can be like David, who said things like this to God: "Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings" (Psalm 17:8). He meant, "Guard me like you would your own eye and protect me." *The Message* interprets it this way: "Keep your eye on me; hide me under your cool wing feathers."

David prayed this with full assurance that his loving Father would.

God's eyes are toward you; his ears hear you; his heart is for you. He has made this abundantly clear.

His question to you is, *Do you see me today? Do you want me close?*

### Keeping "First Love" Eye Contact

Waylon, my three-year-old daughter, loves to crawl into my lap and hold me close. She'll fully lock her eyes on mine,

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unconcerned by anything or anyone else. She'll remain in that place of closeness, not looking away, not ready to leave. Five minutes will go by. Then ten. I'll coolly suggest she go play or see another family member, but she won't entertain it for a second.

*Let them wait, her stare seems to say. I'm with you.*

At night when I put her to sleep, she often will say softly, "Mommy, lay with me," and I will lay down. She will ask for story after story, then a story-song, then a lullaby.

When our routine is done, she pats the pillow beside her and says, "I want your head right here."

If I turn my head away from her, she'll quickly say, "I want to see your face," then press her nose to mine. No fear of personal space, just warmth of complete love. She'll wrap her arm around my neck and place her feet into my tummy softly. This is how she loves to fall asleep, as close as she can possibly get to me.

This girl's heart is completely devoted to me and has been since she was born. Sure, I know she'll mature and create other friendships and meaningful connections, but right here and now, I am her sun, moon, and stars. I have never known a love like this, and neither has she.

I am her first love, the beautiful creation of parent-child connection that comes from the heart of the Father.

In Revelation, when Jesus addressed a church that had turned away from him, he said, "Return to me, your first love" (2:4-5, paraphrased). Some may think of teenage love as first love. While there is a certain kind of beauty to it with all its angst and emotion, I don't think of it that way. For me, "first love" is Waylon smashing her nose to mine, completely secure in my love, unapologetic eye contact, and dismissal of every other possibility. Abandoning everything else for my presence. There's so much more to discover in the slow-burn purpose of her life, so many more seasons and lessons to come, but she knows love now.

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She doesn't have to wait. And my love for her is more than she could ever fathom.

How much more the love of our perfect God, creator and sustainer of life?

*Return to me, your first love.*

Hebrews 12:2 tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. And A. W. Tozer wrote, "Faith is the gaze of a soul upon a saving God."<sup>9</sup>

When we make eye contact, our souls are transformed.

But developing the eyes to see him truly is a slow burn. The way the eyes of our heart develop actually mirror the way our physical eyes do.

The formation of the eye within the womb is a miraculous and elaborate slow burn. Around three weeks after conception, the optic pits form; at five weeks the lens and cornea begin developing. At two months the eyelids take shape and fuse together, guarding the development taking place within. The eyes remain closed until the end of the second trimester. Throughout the final stretch of pregnancy, rapid eye movement and sleep patterns develop and the pupil light reflex matures. Development after birth continues until up to four years of age, when the retina fully evolves.<sup>10</sup>

It's not overnight; it's a slow burn of sight.

What's also interesting is that we see only black and white for about the first four months after birth. Slowly the colors start to come in as our sight transitions from grayscale to a rainbow of colors we are able to discern.<sup>11</sup> It takes time.

When we give our lives to Jesus, our first response can be to set hard, black-and-white boundaries. Our newborn eyes need defined lines to see what is good and what is bad. And if we aren't careful, we can hard-line everyone, turning relationship into religion.

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God's plan for your sight is to fully develop you, not overnight but over time. God's grace allows us to mature daily as we trust him, understanding the complexities that make up life. We still see boundary lines, but, as we mature, they are multifaceted and rich in depth. It would be a mistake to declare that only black and white exist because that's all you see right now, when God is going to bring more depth and insight over time to your vision.

Waiting allows God to mature you and show you that there are always new dimensions in your faith.

And all throughout the slow burn, he is developing the eyes of your heart, helping you better sense his love and nearness, forming an instinct to reach out to him. To rely on him. To feel connected to him.

In the early morning my little girl will climb into my bed wanting to cuddle and play peek-a-boo under the covers. Whenever I go and get her a new bottle, I'll return to find her hiding under the covers waiting to be discovered. I'll pull the covers back, and she'll laugh hysterically.

Yesterday I looked at her sweetly and said, "I've got my eye on you!"

To which she responded with her little voice, slowly learning to string sentences together, "Yooooou got yuuh eye on meeee."

It so touched me. She agreed it was true and rehearsed the reality out loud. She personalized it.

It's one thing for me to remind you of the promise that God guides us with his eye, but the power is when you personalize the promise and carry it with you daily.

Waylon knows she is my delight. She knows she is seen. The delight of a child knowing that full attention and care is

WAITING ALLOWS  
GOD TO MATURE YOU  
AND SHOW YOU THAT  
THERE ARE ALWAYS  
NEW DIMENSIONS  
IN YOUR FAITH.

## SLOW BURN

completely focused, missing nothing. God longs for you to have this kind of relationship with him.

Even when you feel like hiding, running, or disappearing, his love is ready to wrap you up. Because of his heart for you, you can feel safe and secure knowing that you're seen and perfectly loved in every season. You can lift your eyes to the heavens with a smile and confidently say to your Creator, "You've got your eye on me!"