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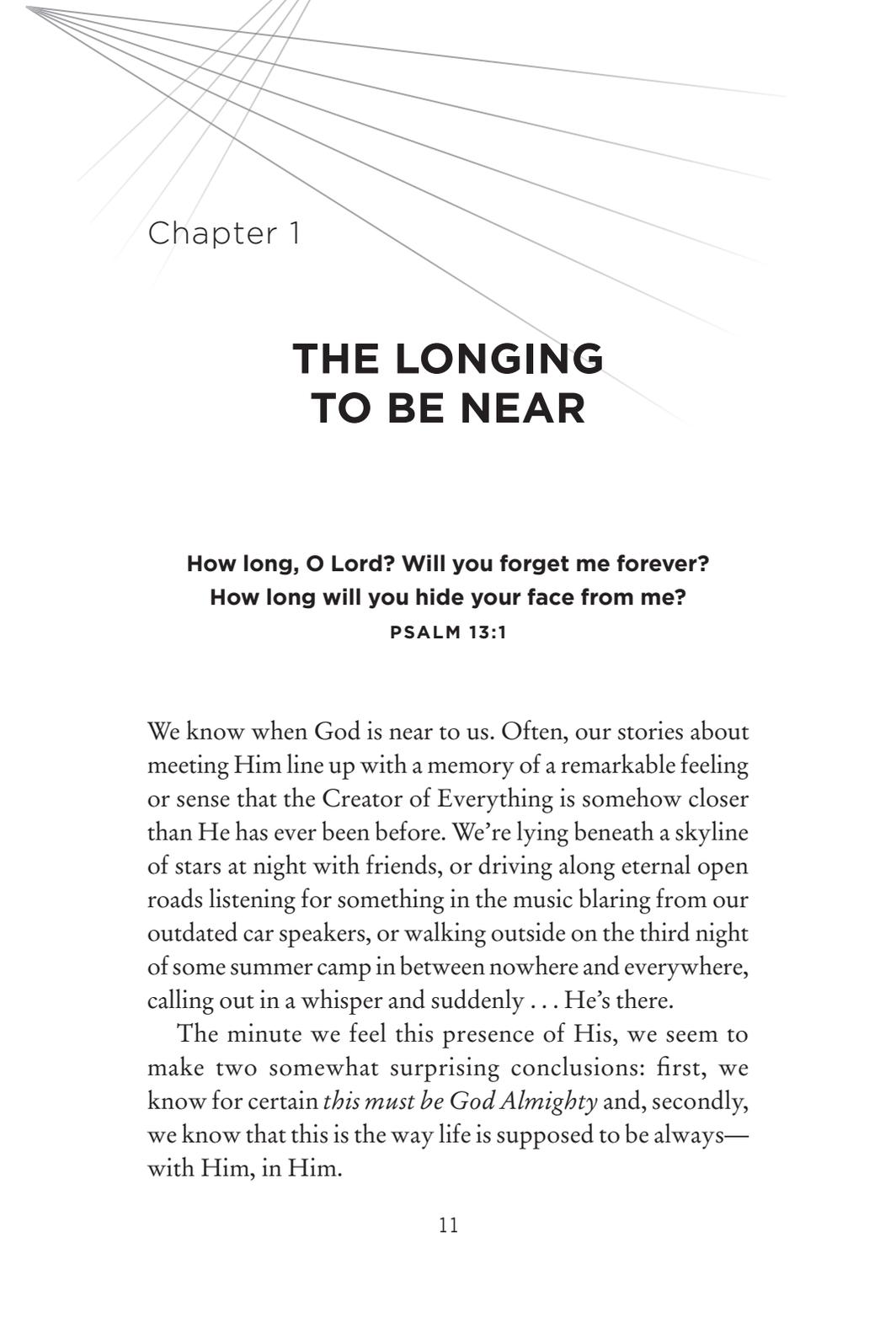
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## Chapter 1

# THE LONGING TO BE NEAR

**How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?**

**PSALM 13:1**

We know when God is near to us. Often, our stories about meeting Him line up with a memory of a remarkable feeling or sense that the Creator of Everything is somehow closer than He has ever been before. We're lying beneath a skyline of stars at night with friends, or driving along eternal open roads listening for something in the music blaring from our outdated car speakers, or walking outside on the third night of some summer camp in between nowhere and everywhere, calling out in a whisper and suddenly . . . He's there.

The minute we feel this presence of His, we seem to make two somewhat surprising conclusions: first, we know for certain *this must be God Almighty* and, secondly, we know that this is the way life is supposed to be always—with Him, in Him.

Pastors like me often are skeptical of these “feelings,” and you may have heard one or two of us tell you that you shouldn’t trust this “feeling” of yours, that faith is not about those sorts of things—you should get your head on straight and start learning some theology! Yes, that’s what we say!

But what if moments where we felt close to God, however short and sweet they were, told us something true about being human? What if the glimpses of divine intimacy were invitations into becoming entirely whole? What if being fully human involved being fully wrapped up in something completely divine?

It’s possible. But just because it’s possible doesn’t mean it’s common, or that most of us take advantage of it, or ever take something like the presence of God seriously.

As I minister to my restless and anxious generation, I can’t help but think that we must be missing God.

Most of what I deal with as a pastor involves people struggling to find, feel, experience, and know God. This is most of the job. A recent study says people come to church because they want to feel close to God and, as a pastor, many of those same people expect me to help them do just that. But how are they to know when they *do* find Him? And when they do find Him, how do they maintain the close proximity?

These are the questions Christians have wrestled with for years. There are no simple steps to rejoining God in His presence, no quick remedy for a heart that misses Him. But at the same time there are things people have done for

thousands of years that help us push away the misconceptions of what it means to be near God and usher us into His entire reality. I am certain this conversation will continue on—it will and should keep going until long after we die. But as I minister to my restless and anxious generation, watch people at my bus stops staring at their phones, and read studies expounding on our collective loneliness, it becomes clear that my generation feels that they must be missing God . . . or something like Him.

Sometimes I'll be talking with someone at one of my church's Sunday services or meeting a student in our youth ministry for the first time, and it becomes painfully clear why they decided to come: they just want to talk to someone. Mother Teresa is famous for saying that the greatest epidemic in the world is not poverty or disease, but loneliness. I think people come to church for the same reason they sit up at night on Twitter or Netflix . . . they just need someone or something to be connected with.

### **LOOKING TO CONNECT WITH GOD**

In our loneliness, we look to God for a connection too. Many students tell me they pray at night. I think this might be because that is their most lonely time. The friends are gone, the noise has quieted, and they lie in the dark, feeling the weight of their limitations as human beings.

Our prayers to God during these times are similar to texting a friend or seeing our phone buzz because we received attention on social media. Today, we want God to respond as instantaneously as our friends can, and when He

doesn't, we are brought into despair. And so we wonder, *where is God when I need Him?*

But what should we expect of Him? Is this "presence" actually available to us in the way we would like in the twenty-first century? What if He never promised what we are hoping for? What if He promised something more than we hope for? Something better?

I was in eighth grade when I believe I first felt the weighty, terrifying, and peaceful presence of God. Theologians might call it God's "special" or "manifest" presence; some just call it "an encounter with the Holy Spirit." Whatever you want to call it, all I know is I *felt* something. I really cannot describe it, nor can many other Christians, at least very well. But at the core of my personhood, I felt more wicked and disgusting than ever before, but more loved than I had previously ever imagined—all at one time. The common reaction was *not* my normal go-to move: I cried. I do not know why I cried. In fact, at this particular moment, I was playing guitar in front of about seventy-five of my peers, helping lead worship, when it all happened.

I didn't know what to do, but I knew I couldn't be forever titled The-Kid-Who-Cried-Whilst-Playing-Crappy-Electric-Guitar-At-Camp—I would not stand for it! But I also seemingly could not tame this experience. And so, my declaration came when I set my guitar down, went into the front row, fell to the floor, and went about my crying.

I didn't cry for *that* long, but it was a solid, steady cry. After I settled down I was kind of in a trance, just thinking. I thought about my short life thus far and my life ahead, I thought about my friends, about girls, about my mom and

dad and brother and sister and everything I'd ever read or heard about God, which, granted, wasn't much. As I sat there, listening to the music while the band I had just abandoned continued to play, I felt more alive than I ever had before.

When I came home from the trip, I had next to no idea what had exactly happened other than the fact that I believed I had encountered God. I grew up in a rather agnostic home without much exposure to Scripture and had been in Catholic school since early elementary school. I was perplexed by the concept of God meeting me in the way I had felt He did that night.

I can remember sitting over my dining room table with my mom, who had come back to her faith. She was asking me about the trip and I started to tell her about The Night. I remember precisely what I said. It's unfortunately important to mention here that, during this time in my life, I had been saving up and stocking massive amounts of music gear in my basement (and by "massive amounts," I mean a couple of pedals, amps, mics, and guitars). I thought I was building a "studio." For sure, I had a growing setup that I, as a young teenage boy, adored. And when I was telling my mom everything about The Night, I said something that even surprised *me*.

"Mom," I said, "I don't know what happened that night, but I know I would trade everything I own, all of my music stuff, to have it again."

And in many ways that's my story. Slowly over high school I did, in fact, sell or give away all of my music gear except for one guitar. I ditched my very feasible and practical

idea of becoming a famous rock star (read that again, and make sure to add the sarcasm), dumped my eighth-grade girlfriend (whatever that meant and means to this day, I do not know), changed the high school I was planning on attending, and began my clumsy pursuit of God. Ever since then, I've been doing perhaps what you find yourself doing today: looking for Him again.

### HOW POWERFUL IS THIS?

Is it possible that I misinterpreted my entire story? That I was just overly emotional and experiencing teenage angst and confusion, making up this whole God thing along the way? Did I change my entire life for some worthless and inconsequential adolescent experience?

I suppose it's *possible*.

But what if it's also possible that there is a divine resource, a God currently available to you and me, whom we are completely missing out on every day?

If you have never had a type of "religious experience," I can almost guarantee that someone you know has had something like it. In addition, it appears as though our Bibles are filled with stories of people encountering God and seeing their lives take new direction afterwards. For example, Abraham was married to a barren woman—near the end of his family line in a polytheistic community—when this One True God made Himself known. In fact, God's showing up in Abraham's life is the basis for three of the world's most important religious movements. Whether you're Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, all of us claim to be

“children of Abraham,” or descendants of a man who was changed because he was near to God and interacted with Him in some way, sensed His calling, and followed Him in what the Hebrews call “faith.” It could be, and has been argued, that you really cannot expect to know much about most world civilizations without knowing something about this man, Abraham. He is responsible for most of human spirituality.

Did Abraham really interact with God? Was it really life changing? If he didn’t, millions—billions, really—need to reevaluate their entire understanding of human life.

And these experiences are not just of old-school, biblical proportions. One of my best friends lives with his family in Turkey, where 98 percent of the population is Muslim. The young people in his city, Istanbul, grow up in a culture that promotes Islam and puts Christianity at a distance, claiming most of it as untrue. My friend works with missionaries, and the last time my wife and I visited him we sat in a café as I asked him how *anyone* in this kind of culture can be converted to Christianity.

“Dreams,” he said simply as he sipped his Turkish tea. He went on to tell me that many of the converts in his church have had personal, relatable, powerful experiences with the presence of God either in a dream or in some strange vision. “Jesus appears to them . . . and they believe,” he said shrugging. He acknowledged the bizarre nature of it all, but what are you going to say? These people have an experience with being near to this particular God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and they change.

I remember after our trip my wife was reading a Christian

magazine that ran a cover story on people in the Middle East having an abnormal number of dreams where Jesus visited them. The writer said it was happening all over.

“Hey,” my wife said.

“Yeah?” I replied.

“It’s just like Istanbul.” She was pointing at the cover.

Later, when I was in China, I met a man who was an artist. He painted beautiful landscapes of the Asian coastline and began telling me about them. As he explained each of them, he told me that he “sees the presence of God” when he paints his canvasses. When he gave me his business card, there was a small cross on the bottom left corner and, written in small Chinese letters, a Bible verse.

#### THE SPACIOUSNESS OF GOD

All of these stories (and countless others, certainly) are of course circumstantial, which is OK, because I’m not working to prove to you or myself that God’s presence is real or that it has a certain power. “Prove” is the wrong word for what I’m trying to do; I’m just trying to get us to think about all of this.

If God isn’t real, what are the religious doing? What are they feeling? Yes, of course, we can hook our brains up to monitors and see *how* it is happening and *where* in the brain it is going on, and even *what else happens* at that physical place in the brain under different circumstances. But all of that doesn’t answer *why* it happens. *Why* is this science triggered? What sets it off? Why feel it *then* and not some other time? Just because we know *how* and *where*

and *what* happens in our biological makeup doesn't mean we've automatically understood *why* our brains are responding and, in some cases, our whole trajectory of life changes after such experiences. This is because most of our experience happens not in our brains, but our minds.

There are these studies about silence and solitude I keep thinking about where people's brains actually begin to repair themselves just by sitting alone and meditating every day. Yes, their brains *repair themselves* by the simple spiritual practice of silence and meditation. There are also studies about how our brains light up in the strangest places when we're in worship services and when we pray with friends. As I said, we know *how* it happens and we know *where* it happens, but have you ever thought about *why* it happens?<sup>1</sup>

God is very spacious, and I believe He is interacting with more people and in more ways than you or your pastor or spiritual leader could tell you about. We live in what Dallas Willard would call a "God-Bathed World."<sup>2</sup> You and I do not just live in a "spiritual" world, but a world where "One Spirit" dominates and permeates all of existence, everywhere we go. God appears in the vastness of the ocean and the whispers of prayers; He is with us in our tears and alongside us as we laugh. There is no escaping God. As the psalmist asks, "Where shall I flee from your presence" (Ps. 139:7)?

And so this makes me think God is not isolated to these bizarre, seemingly once-in-a-lifetime religious experiences. Although He certainly *is* there in some special way, most of the time we are living in a world bathed in God's

presence, and we are completely missing out on it. Instead our eyes lock with the screen on our phone and we miss Him. We see the worst in others and we miss Him. We stress about money and worry about time and fear death and watch TV and we miss Him. We experience the joy of a kiss and the pain of cancer and everything in between and we rarely talk to Him about it all—we do not believe He is involved or available in the midst of what we call “our life.”

I’ve got to wonder, in our hours of swiping our phones and mashing buttons on remotes and appliances while our world turns, is there any possibility we’re not living awake to all of the things God is actually doing?

We are living in a world bathed in God’s presence and completely missing out on it.

There is nowhere that God is not, and yet, it seems we do not always recognize or seek Him. After we have these rare moments within God’s space, we may want to go back, and can’t. It’s not enough for us to have had *one* great moment with Him or near Him like my moment in eighth grade, guitar in hand; we need to go back to Him again and again. Something about this presence comforts us, challenges us, and protects us all at once. I’m convinced that regular, everyday people experience something like this more than many Christians want to believe. God is active and present in more places than our churches want us to know. And there are more people—and perhaps this is you—who want to be let in again. And I think we can.

**WHAT THE SCRIPTURES SAY  
ABOUT GOD'S PRESENCE**

“In your presence there is fullness of joy” says one psalmist in the Old Testament (Ps. 16:11). Another psalmist writes, “For me it is good to be near God” (73:28). And yet again, perhaps most famously, another writer of psalms declares, “My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord” (84:2; “The courts of the Lord” is a way of saying, “Where God is”). In that same song, the writer declares, “A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness” (v. 10).

Right alongside all of this, there are is equal or greater number of Psalms agonizing over God’s absence: “How long . . . will you forget me?” cries the songwriter in Psalm 13:1. In speaking of the lack of God in his life, another writer says, “My tears have been my food” (Ps. 42:3). Remember the famous psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (22:1; later quoted by Jesus on the cross)? What a profound yet sad song to be included in the Hebrew book of prayer.

In the New Testament, we see many moments of God’s nearness to people. God appears to people and shows His glory to others (Matt. 3:16), speaks to people (Matt. 3:16–17; 17:5–6; Acts 13:1–3, 2 Cor. 12:7–9), and moves/works in people, imparting power and courage (see Stephen’s Spirit-empowered speech in Acts 7).<sup>3</sup> The apostle Paul planted various churches and even has instructions for his congregations on how to deal with the God who is constantly

speaking, working, moving, and revealing Himself through His Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12–14, 1 Thess. 5:16–23).<sup>4</sup>

All of these support what you and I may feel or know from experience about God. We want to be near to Him; some would say, we *long* to be near and with God. We don't know much about Him; we're unclear on the projects He's running and His processes for accomplishing it all. Yet whether we call ourselves believers or not, there is a deep, dare I say *primal*, part of us that hopes for a time

The Scriptures  
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when the gap between us and this God could be closed. The truth for how all of this works together is complicated, as all those passages of Scripture I just cited suggest.

The Bible seems to be filled with people who speak for us, who say, "Yes, God is *supposed* to be near. He is *supposed* to show up." Yes, all of us at times desire to be near God. And when we are near Him, it is good. Reading these Scriptures can be cathartic because they seem to understand who we are and what we desire oftentimes better than we do.

#### WHEN WE FEEL DISTANT FROM GOD

For those of us who have experienced this distance from God, I want to say this: it is real. We are justified in our *feeling* of being far from God. I think, in many ways, this is an essential part of being human. To feel dissatisfied with our relationship with God and to not be OK with

## THE LONGING TO BE NEAR

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our proximity to Him might be a gift from God Himself. As French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in his classic *Pensees*: “There was once in man a true happiness [when Adam and Eve first walked with God, without sin. Today every human] . . . tries in vain to fill with everything around him, . . . though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.”<sup>5</sup>

But at the same time, we must examine this emotional distance from God and put it under a kind of prayerful microscope. Our desires change and are usurped by other wants and needs deep within our hearts. As these things come up, we medicate in different ways, and the longing for God slowly goes away—and we should emphasize the “*slowly*” part, right? Day by day, it’s like growing up in reverse, you never feel it or know it’s happening until you take the time to measure it. And sometimes, when we finally take the time to measure where we are at with God—as we look at the communion meal, or hear a sermon, or hear a song about Him—the damage is already done. It’s as if we have drifted from a dock; all of a sudden we no longer see land.

### THE LONG PLAINS OF FAITH

When I began my journey with God, many people told me about the “mountaintop” moments of faith. They told me how we get moments high above the normal horizon of life to be closer to Him. Some people even told me that

camp and retreats were “thin places” where heaven and earth sort of meet. I liked that.

But people also told me about the “valleys” of faith and life, how times of trouble bring us into deep caverns of doubt, disbelief, and depression. I can remember when my parents were getting divorced; some years later, when I was nineteen, my leaders told me this was a season where I would have to just keep walking, because maybe a “mountaintop” was in the future. I liked this too; it helped me a great deal.

But nobody told me about the long stretches in between the mountains and valleys. No one told me that most of my life in faith would be painstakingly ordinary and benign. No one mentioned tales of the long, grassy plains of faith—the eternal highways of straight paths where you struggle to stay awake at the wheel and hope for the rest stop promised miles before.

In his famous novel *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac wrote about how you never really know how big America is until you drive across it. I have felt this several times on different trips through California or the Midwest. Once, while making our way to Wyoming, my family and I spent an entire day without taking a single turn. For eight to ten hours, my father kept the wheel steady. I stared out the window of the RV we had rented to see the landscape of our country. Everything was moving, but nothing was changing. It reminds me of faith sometimes.

I tend to have more days like this than days where I felt like I was at the top of Everest or near the bottom of any great American valley. Life with God is not always

extreme. Faith is not just about “mountaintops and valleys.” It also involves traffic jams and long stretches of unexciting freeways.

These are precisely the times we lose God. As a pastor, I notice most of those who tell me about their dissatisfaction with God are in a very *normal* time in their life. Rarely will someone complain of feeling distant from God after a camp or missions trip, or a time of great suffering. Mostly, those unsure about where God is in all of it are in the routine of daily work, whether it’s school or their nine-to-five job.

My story involves learning how to relate with God during the long plains of faith. While I’ve experienced the mountains and the valleys—death, debt, disease, and the divorce of my parents—I’ve also mostly experienced long stretches of time that lack anything special. And so it has become necessary to develop a theology—an understanding of God—that reflects this precise experience. What do we do with a God who seemingly goes away? Does He really do that?

If we think that life with and in God’s presence is a beautiful, life-giving thing, and the people in the Bible seem to talk quite positively about it, then why are we not experiencing it all the time? What’s wrong? Are the communication lines broken on our side or His? And if the break is on His side, what did we do?

Everything was moving but nothing was changing. It reminds me of faith sometimes.