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THE THIN PLACE IN THE VEIL

■ God doesn't behave the way I wish He would.

Even though I've been a Christian for many years, I still have a hard time explaining to someone who is not a believer why I can't help but be a follower of Jesus Christ. It's not that I lack the words to describe the doctrine or to tell the story of how God got hold of me. But how do I describe God's powerful but invisible presence that keeps pulling me toward Him?

It would be easier if God chose to be more visible and obvious about how He inserts himself into people's lives. I would love to be able to say, "I am a Christian because God appeared above my house in the form of a radiant fireball and summoned me outside. In view of all my neighbors, who recorded the whole thing, He declared (in a booming voice, of course) that Jesus Christ is the way to salvation and that I should follow Him."

When Hollywood portrays God, they often do it in this more readily grasped, visual way. Who comes to mind when you think of a Hollywood-created God? A kindly, cigar-smoking George Burns? The wise and unflappable

Morgan Freeman? Or maybe you prefer it when the special effects kick in and you get something like the God of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.¹

Do you remember how the presence of God is portrayed in that movie? The Nazis want the ark of the covenant because they think they can use the power of God's presence in it for their own evil purposes. When they finally get the ark, they lift up the lid and watch as bright white waves of smoke rise up from the box. The light swirls round and round, dozens of ribbons of it flying high in the air, with awe-inspiring beauty and power. Then majestic columns of fire rise from the ark and extend high into the air. The Nazis are triumphant.

But then, because God is apparently smart enough to know that these guys are Nazis and therefore bad guys, the whole scene turns ugly for them. The fire forms into huge daggers that stab right through the center of the soldiers' bodies and kill them.

But that punishment is only for the low-ranking Nazi soldiers. The top Nazis suffer an even worse fate. The heads of the two leaders begin to melt, and they scream in pain. As if that were not gruesome enough, the head of the most villainous, whiny-voiced Nazi leader explodes in blood and gore like a smashed watermelon. Then all the fire and smoke come together in one gigantic column that shoots high above the island. Finally it collapses back down into the ark with a tremendous slam of the lid.

Beautiful. Smoke and fire and melting heads. That may not fit everyone's concept of God's presence, but at least it's something people can see and understand.

In my own life, the Holy Spirit doesn't work that way. He is not flash and spectacle. He is not a booming voice. Nor is

He a crusty but affable old man. He is not anything a Hollywood camera could capture.

He is a loving, abiding presence. More than anything else, I am a Christian because of God's powerful, pursuing Spirit. As Romans 8:16 says, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." I can also discuss my faith in terms of doctrine and theology and biblical principles, but God's *presence* is what keeps me tied to the faith even through crises of doubt, discouragement, and my own failures. How can I describe that presence? It's the most important part of my faith, but it's also the hardest to talk about and the easiest for skeptics to dismiss.

The idea for this book was sparked by an overheard conversation about the presence of God. It was a simple moment, but I couldn't get it out of my mind. As my friends in the Christian writers group that was meeting in my home were getting ready to leave, I walked into the kitchen to hear one of our members, Lynn, speaking to another member of the group. She was describing a recent worship service she had been part of in which the people powerfully sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit. She said it was one of those times when the veil between us and eternity seemed very thin and almost disappeared. I can still picture the way she held her palms together as she said this, as if she were touching this thin, almost transparent barrier that she was describing.

That thin place in the veil is what this book is about.

God is always with us, I believe, but often the barriers are so thick—because of noise, disbelief, indifference, daily responsibilities, and other distractions—that we find ourselves paying little attention to Him. He is easy to ignore. Popular entertainment mocks Him, the political world is wary of Him, much of the intellectual elite denies Him,

and a frenzied online social media loses Him in a flurry of trivia. It's easy to leave God out of our conversations and thoughts—at work, at school, in social settings, and unfortunately sometimes even at church. How can we open our eyes to His presence?

This book will consider “God in the ordinary” and “God in the extraordinary.” In the ordinary His Spirit is powerfully present in music, in nature, in the intellect, in prayer, and in Scripture. We may find God's presence in our relationships, not only with those we love but also in those who cause us problems.

In the extraordinary He also manifests himself at rare times in more unusual ways, in powerful revivals, in people's encounters with angels, or in the moments before death.

I wish reaching the thin places was all in our own power, but it isn't. As this book will explore, God reveals and conceals His presence in His own timing for His own purposes, as He has always done. The temptation, when God seems distant, is to fill the space with a counterfeit god. You don't even have to choose one—the god will choose you. Many people are worshiping multiple counterfeit gods right now without even knowing it.

I wrote this book because I want to do all I can to strip away the barriers that hide God's presence. I long to get as close as I can to the thin place in the veil that my friend was describing.

If you long for that too—for a deeper connection with the Holy Spirit—then I ask you to join me in these pages.