

## Introduction

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# HOPE IN THE DESERT

*How in the world did I get here?* Ever ask yourself that question? I have, and I remember the time and place. I was standing at the window of my fourth-floor E Ring Pentagon office.<sup>1</sup> I was gazing out across acres of parked cars at the three stainless-steel spires of the Air Force Memorial soaring 270 feet into a cloudless azure sky overlooking Arlington National Cemetery. My journey to this window was an unexpected one. My wife and I had been making plans to retire from the Air Force in San Antonio, Texas, when I got the news that President Barack Obama had nominated me for promotion to brigadier general. Several months later, the Senate confirmed my nomination.

I was an unlikely candidate, to be sure. While I had a strong military record with the prerequisite Major Command assignments, there were some significant holes. I'd never been selected to attend Professional Military Education (PME) in residence. All my PME was completed as distance learning. I was not an Air Force Academy graduate, and I'd never had an Academy assignment. These are things you'd typically find in a general officer's record. Oh, and I didn't play golf. Okay, I added that last one for fun, but you get the point.

Just the numbers made it improbable. Only about 2 percent of Air Force officers are promoted to colonel. On top of that, only one chaplain colonel is promoted to brigadier general every three or four years. As a colonel, chances are you'll be considered for promotion to one star no more than twice in your career. In 2012, out of thirty-four chaplain colonels in the Air Force, only one would be chosen for promotion. Somehow in God's providence, I was selected.

For me, the road to brigadier general was a long and winding one. As it turned out, it was a bit too long and winding. Three years later, it came time to select the next two-star chief of chaplains, and at sixty-three years of age, I had run out of airspeed. The law required brigadier and major generals to retire no later than the first day of the first month after their sixty-fourth birthdays. I retired January 1, 2016, thankful for the thirty-three years God allowed me to be an airman. I was grateful for the people we'd come to love like family, for the places we'd been, and for the rare view of the world from the E Ring I was blessed to experience.

Along the way to that window, Ruth and I enjoyed some days of great joy and deep fulfillment, but we also endured times when life was dark and difficult. There were detours and disappointments. Through it all, we came to know God's love was real and his grace sufficient for every trial. When I say we came to know God's love was real and his grace sufficient, I'm talking about the kind of knowing that happens when you've walked through life's hard stuff with someone.

Maybe your road hasn't always been an easy one either. You've had good days, but you've also struggled through times of loneliness, depression, or anxiety. Maybe a devastating loss, a heartache, or a disappointment has robbed you of the life you were counting on. Lately, it seems many are on a hard road. Here's something you need to know about painful circumstances: They can talk us into believing something about ourselves or about God that isn't true. In our despair, believing a myth, we find ourselves in darkness, searching for hope. It's a

perilous place to be. Without the light of truth, the hope we need to live eludes us.

There was a quote in giant script on the auditorium wall when I went through survival, evasion, resistance, and escape (SERE) training as a young combat flight crew officer near Spokane, Washington. I've not forgotten it. "You can live forty days without food, four days without water, and four minutes without air. But you can't live four seconds without hope." Maybe there's a bit of hyperbole in that, but we know the idea is true. We can't live without hope.

Years ago, when I deployed to Prince Sultan Air Base in the Arabian Desert, our team of chaplains and chaplain assistants had the opportunity to name the chapel that served the five thousand Americans assigned there. We came up with something we thought was perfect and sent a request for the commander's approval to name it Desert Hope Chapel.

The commander didn't care for that name. I'm sure he'd heard it said more than once in his military training that hope is not a plan. When you're briefing the commander on some proposed new course of action, you never start with, "We hope to do this or that . . ." To him, it must have sounded like the Chapel of Uncertainty or the Chapel of We Hope So, but We're Not Sure. I paid a visit to the commander, "hoping" to convince him that the biblical concept of hope was a worthy name for the chapel.

Being the great leader he was, he listened to the dissenting voice. Being the man of faith he was, he understood that the hope God offers us is not wishful thinking dependent on ever-changing and uncertain circumstances. It is a rock-solid confidence built on God's unchanging character. He agreed to the name.

The "dirt boys" in the Civil Engineering Squadron found us the perfect rock to place in front of the chapel. A talented airman fabricated large metal letters and attached them to the flat side of the rock. A front loader delivered the massive stone to the site and set it up for us. We were in business as the Desert Hope Chapel.



Our team of chaplains and chaplain assistants at Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia. I'm standing on the far right.

Through the years, thousands of airmen from several nations entered those doors parched, dry, and weary. Inside, they found an oasis in the desert. They were welcomed as family. They were refreshed with grace. They were liberated with truth. They found hope.

Let me tell you my twofold purpose in writing this book. First, wherever you are today, whatever you're going through, my mission is to offer you a taste of hope that will revive you and give you the strength you need to take the next step. Second, my prayer is that, refreshed by hope, you might offer an oasis for someone else on a hard road.

I invite you to read on and drink in the hope that bubbles from the stories I share. As you do, dare to ask God to reveal his truth to you. In the light of that truth, ask God to heal the wounds of your past, give you the strength you need for today, encourage you with the hope of a better day coming, and give you a renewed sense of purpose for living. Would you make that your prayer as you begin this book? Let me suggest you invite a friend or group to read these eleven chapters along with you.

Use them as a springboard to talk about your own story and the story God is writing.

At the end of chapters 1 through 10, I give you a clear reason you can be sure God is for you regardless of the circumstances. There is a prayer you can make your own as you talk to God about what you've just read. Following the prayer, there are a few questions you can use in small group discussion or for processing in your journal. I also share some inspirational songs from my playlist—each one lifts my spirit. As you finish each chapter, take a moment to think about something that spoke to you, and let the music help you meditate on the truth that God is for you.

## Chapter 1

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# THE GOD WHO NEVER SLEEPS

*I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.*

Romans 8:38–39 MSG

I lay flat on my back in the middle of what's usually a busy two-lane road. The scorching August sun had set more than an hour before, but the asphalt beneath me still radiated heat. Even so, I shivered uncontrollably. I knew I was in shock. The Self-Aid and Buddy Care training every airman receives kicked in and I asked for the blue wool blanket from my Air Force days that I kept in the trunk of my car. An officer standing nearby found the blanket and laid it over me.

Moments before, someone had forced my car door open and eased me out from behind the crushed steering wheel. When I was out of the car and nearly upright, he saw my right foot was pointed in the wrong direction. “Lay him down!” he shouted to his partner.

The blanket lay over me with comforting warmth. My trembling subsided, and the stabbing pain in my leg eased. From my vantage point, the flashing lights reflecting on my car revealed a forest of legs gathering around me. Two EMTs appeared and knelt beside me, immobilizing my right leg with a splint. Soon we’d be on our way to John Peter Smith Hospital in Fort Worth, Texas.

It had happened in the blink of an eye. The only warning was a twitch in the oncoming headlights a split second before the head-on collision. I had no time to brake or to brace myself. The impact left me stunned but still conscious. The moment of collision would replay in my dreams for years.

Our evening had started out as a much-needed getaway from the grind of school and work. Ruth and I had invited another seminary couple to join us and our precocious five-year-old daughter to see an amateur production at one of the large churches in town. After the play and a stop at McDonald’s for ice cream, our big night out was done. We headed home to our little fixer-upper just twenty minutes south of the city. Little did I know it would be two months before I’d make it home.

A nurse, also on her way home, arrived at the scene shortly after the crash. Our angel of mercy, whose name I still don’t know, left her car and climbed into the ambulance with our daughter Annie. She rode to the emergency room with her, comforting our frightened little girl, who had blood streaming down her face. Annie’s mom and I were not able to be with her, but she wasn’t alone.

In the ER, my clothes were cut off and I watched as a metal rod was drilled through my leg below the knee. The doctor determined my right femur had snapped in two in a jagged break. So the plan was to put me in traction, hanging a weight at the

foot of the bed to pull the ends of the broken femur apart and allow bone material to fill in and mend the break.

Two young men in scrubs wheeled me out of the ER with my leg hoisted in traction. Just before that, I'd heard a report that Ruth and our friends would be okay, and I signed a document approving surgery for our daughter, to repair a cut just below her eye. (She wears a scar there to this day.)

My family arrived from Louisiana the next afternoon. When they spoke to me, my responses didn't make much sense. They called for a nurse. An X-ray revealed that bits of fat had entered my bloodstream from the broken femur and traveled to my lungs. I spent the next fifty hours on a machine that helped me breathe, dead to the world in the intensive care unit. For me, it was one long night. I'm sure I looked pitiable and alone there in my ICU cubicle. Some may have looked at me and wondered whether God had me in time-out. Maybe they were curious what I had done wrong to have God punish me like that. To others, it may have appeared God had simply abandoned me. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

Maybe life has knocked you down. In your pain, you hear a voice telling you that you have no choice but to face this battle alone. Even worse, feelings of guilt and shame or a sense of unworthiness you may have harbored in your heart for years can make you especially vulnerable to believing that God is against you. Don't let your pain and hard circumstances talk you into believing something that isn't true. Anger, especially the kind we turn on ourselves, can isolate us from the help we need from God and others. And then few things can be as deadly as the pride that says, "I don't need God's help or anyone else's."

David was a guy who seemed to process his hard times by songwriting. It was a great way for him to identify the problem, clarify and voice his feelings, and most importantly, to review what he knew to be true. Imagine for a moment what crisis he was in when he wrote the song we know as Psalm 121. We know there were times he was running for his life from treacherous

enemies. He struggled with a rebellious son. There were times he descended into deep depression and felt like he had been abandoned. Where was he and what was he facing when he wrote the song with the iconic words “I lift up my eyes to the mountains” (v. 1)? What was the trouble that caused him to scan the distant mountains, searching for an escape? Was he in agony when he cried out, “Where does my help come from?” Can you identify with that?

Maybe you feel so hurt, so afraid, so trapped that you just want to be somewhere else? You want to escape to a safe place, to head for the hills, as David’s words suggest. You want to be anywhere other than the place you are now. Maybe you’ve cried in agony, feeling like no one can truly understand what you’re going through. Sometimes, even though others are around you, you feel like you’re on your own. May I ask what’s got you hunkered down in fear? Or what has caused you to withdraw in anger? Has something traumatic caused you to doubt God’s love for you? As you read David’s words, drink in this life-changing truth: There is a God who sees you. There is a God who is for you. That just may be the water your battle-weary, bone-dry soul needs right now to live.

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

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

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

The LORD will keep you from all harm—  
he will watch over your life;  
the LORD will watch over your coming and going  
both now and forevermore.

(Psalm 121)

David's words are three thousand years old. Yet they're still fresh with hope. On a tough day in my life, they revived me like a bottle of cold, crisp sparkling water on a hot and humid Houston day.

Don't gloss over David's poetic language. What is the essential truth he wanted us to take away? He wanted us to see the priceless benefit of knowing and trusting God in every circumstance—especially the painful, scary ones. David shared the truth he experienced in his own life not just as a statement of fact but as an appeal. When a tsunami of pain or grief hits us and we're in danger of being ripped away from the faith that has been our anchor, his words invite us to take refuge in God's constant care so we can stand our ground and shout the truth to the storm raging around us or the fear lurking within us: "I am not alone!" We can say, "My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth" (v. 2)! Why not post that on your social media or write it on a card and place it somewhere you'll see every day? Make it the home screen on your phone. Or best of all, do what David did when God shared a truth with him: Memorize it. "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (119:11).

Switching from his story to ours, David added, "The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night" (121:6). The poet was saying that 24/7, God is with you. Through the heat of the day, God is with you. And all through the lonely night hours when we feel most vulnerable, God is still there. But there's more. David wasn't just saying God watches over us every hour. He was also telling us God cares about every good, bad, and ugly detail of our lives. He is always there with the help only he can give.

As young parents, we always did our best to keep an eye on

our kids, but there were times they wore us out. I'm enjoying watching some young friends experience the joys of adjusting to life with their first child. They welcomed a beautiful little girl into their lives several months ago. Immediately, baby Sawyer took charge of their schedules. To their dismay, this sweet child with an angelic face loves the nightlife. Mom and Dad are probably not safe to operate machinery right now. If you've been there, you understand.

**God cares about every good, bad, and ugly detail of our lives. He is always there with the help only he can give.**

There are pictures of me meeting our firstborn. I laugh when I see them. Our daughter, Anne, was seven days old when I made it home from the Air Force SERE school in Washington state, which included prisoner of war (POW) camp training (yes, there's a school for that). I had left immediately after my experience as a prisoner in the POW camp, running a serious sleep deficit. In the pictures of our first day together, I'm holding our new baby girl with my chin on my chest. As excited as I was to be a new dad, I could not keep my eyes open. Annie and I were both sleeping peacefully.

Not so with God. "He . . . will neither slumber nor sleep," the poet assured us (Psalm 121:4). There's never a moment when you're out of his sight. There's never a moment when God does not care. No cloud can hide you and no distraction can keep you from his watchful care. In fact, nothing can separate you from God's love and care. Try speaking these words out loud right now: Nothing can separate me from God's love! Not this disease. Not this divorce. Not this darkness. Not even this doubt. Absolutely nothing.

How did David know that? He knew because he had lived that truth. When he was a shepherd boy guarding his father's

sheep, he learned God was with him day and night. He remembered how he had rescued a sheep from the jaws of a lion with God's help. He could never forget how he defeated a giant with God's help, using a slingshot and a precision-guided rock. Through the ups and downs in his life, David had come to know that God was watching over him with continuous, unblinking care, even when his painful circumstances might have tempted him to believe that God was against him. The death of a child and the rebellion of a son could not pull him from the truth that anchored his soul. In this pain and in this loss, he could still say, "My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth" (v. 2).

### THE ORDEAL

When I read David's words, "He who watches over you will not slumber" (v. 3), I'm reminded of an unforgettable experience I had as a Boy Scout. As a Scout progresses through the ranks from Tenderfoot toward Eagle, he may be invited to join the Order of the Arrow. I accepted such an invitation and showed up at the camp with my gear ready for the induction weekend, aptly named the "Ordeal."

The Ordeal began that night with a group of us boys sitting wide-eyed around a blazing bonfire. A leader stood and spoke firmly to us. "Beginning now, you may not speak until the Ordeal is complete. Line up!"

There was a long rope to define the line. Each boy grabbed the rope with his left hand. I took my place in the middle. Without a word, the rope started pulling us forward. Step by step, we moved farther away from the circle of light. Entering the dark woods, we followed a narrow, winding trail until it disappeared. Still, the rope pulled us on. Now there were only the night sounds of the woods and our feet shuffling in the rustling leaves, which I noticed were becoming fainter behind me. As we walked on in silence, I realized I was now the tail end of the line.

That was when a hand gripped my shoulder, pulling me from the line, which soon disappeared into the woods without me. A dark silhouette pointed to a spot on the ground. I decided that was where I was supposed to stay.

The silhouette turned to walk away. “Good night,” I heard myself blurt out. It seemed the right thing to say at the time.

The silhouette stopped. He turned toward me and took something from his pocket. I stood rooted to the ground. He reached toward me and took hold of the bamboo with the cotton cord threaded through it, which he had hung around my neck when we sat by the fire. A knife blade flashed open. He cut a notch in the bamboo and spoke in a stern voice. “Do. Not. Speak.”

Years later, I met a member of the Cherokee tribe who spoke with pride about the culture of his people. He shared the story of an early tribal rite of passage for boys on their way to becoming men. He told us how the men of the village would lead the boys into the woods and leave them alone in the darkness to wait for morning, their ears alert to every movement in the leaves and every wild creature’s call.

My face lit up. “I know this story!”

Then my friend came to the best part of his story. After the long, frightful night in the dark woods, the first light of day revealed something wonderful the boy would never forget. All through the night his father had been there standing guard, watching over him. He hadn’t been alone at all.

With the ordeal our family went through when a head-on collision nearly ended my life, it would have been easy to look at our circumstances and think we were alone in a dark place. When you find yourself in an ICU room with a poor prognosis, you may come to a false conclusion. During eight weeks in traction, unable to care for your family, you might be tempted to tell yourself something that’s not true. Wherever your dark night happens to be—a hospital room, a prison cell, or a dinner table with an empty chair—you may be tempted to despair and cry out, “God, have you abandoned me?”

Regardless of what your circumstances may lead you to believe,

you're not alone. Your heavenly Father is watching over you, just as he was watching over David. Even in your suffering, you can be sure he is still for you.

Ruth and I knew a former Air Force doctor who was serving at the hospital where I was in the ICU. While stationed in the San Francisco Bay Area several years before, we had attended the same church and become friends with the good doctor and his wife, Rosemary. After I was moved to the ICU, Dr. Bill Singleton somehow found the time to drive out to Crowley to visit with Ruth. He and our pastor sat next to each other by Ruth's bed, where she was propped up with several pillows.

**You're not alone. Your heavenly Father is watching over you.**

"It doesn't look good for Bob," Dr. Singleton said to her. "But youth is on his side."

He added this bit of encouragement to an otherwise bleak situation. Then he asked her whether I had life insurance and if she knew where that paperwork was.

Several friends heard what had happened to us. When the word reached them that I was in critical condition, they gathered at our church on a Sunday night to pray for me. I'll tell it to you exactly as it happened. The next morning, there was no evidence of the life-threatening emboli that had sent me to the ICU.

Later, I heard of someone who died of a pulmonary embolism on the very same day I recovered. That brings us to a difficult question, doesn't it? I wish I could tell you why God says yes to some prayers and not others. What I can tell you is that God loved the one who lived and the one who died. You may also be thinking, *If God is for us and watching over us, why does he allow bad things to happen to us?* I agree that's an obvious question—and I've saved that discussion for chapter 8.

## LIKE MANNA FROM HEAVEN

Returning to my room, I lay on my back with my right leg hanging from the frame over the bed. I had a family depending on me. For the first time in my adult life, I had no income, and I could do nothing about that. I had just registered for my first fall term at seminary and had to drop out before I ever attended the first class. I had paid the tuition using the GI Bill benefits I'd earned during the six years I served in the Air Force.<sup>1</sup> Now, because I wasn't a student, the VA sent a notice for me to return the money.

When I left the security of the Air Force, I had come up with a plan on how to support our family through three years of seminary. I'd taken night classes after we arrived in Fort Worth to prepare for a Texas real estate license. Once I had my license in hand, Martin Hedrick had taken me on as one of the agents in his realty office. While that was incredibly gracious, it was a terrible time for someone to get started in real estate. Mortgage interest rates had been climbing for the past year and hit 16 percent about the time I showed up at the office.

Despite the sky-high interest rates and my lack of experience in real estate, somehow I listed two houses for sale that summer. Then the accident happened. Back in the office, seasoned agents were hustling and drinking antacid straight from the bottle, trying to move houses. Despite their best efforts, beautiful homes in desirable locations sat on the market month after month. Now, I couldn't even show the two houses I had listed. Amazingly, against all odds, one of the houses I'd listed sold the first month I was in the hospital. Mr. Hedrick brought my wife a check for my share of the commission. The next month, the second house sold. Mr. Hedrick delivered a second check. It was like manna from heaven!

Pain was my most frequent visitor, especially during my first month in traction. The worst was when the muscles around the broken femur would spasm, causing excruciating pain. Thankfully, this didn't happen every day, and it became less frequent as the weeks dragged by.

I only share that to caution you not to misinterpret Psalm 121. God doesn't promise you'll never suffer pain, struggle through hard times, or experience loss. David, the songwriter who wrote the words to Psalm 121, experienced all those things in his life. Consider that Jesus himself suffered the agony and indignity of a criminal's death on a cross. Not only that, but through the centuries, many of the men and women who followed Jesus suffered greatly. In fact, early evidence indicates ten of Jesus's disciples, who were witnesses to his resurrection, chose to die as martyrs rather than deny what they knew to be true.<sup>2</sup> Before the trauma of the cross, Jesus prepared his friends for the hard times he knew were coming for them by saying, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven" (Matthew 5:11–12).

Whatever Psalm 121 means, it doesn't mean a young man driving drunk won't hit us head-on one night on a two-lane road.

So what *does* it mean? It means whatever you're going through, you don't have to go through it alone. God is there with you in your pain, your sorrow, and your struggle. It means there's nothing this world can throw at you that the Maker of heaven and earth can't rescue you from, help you with, heal you of, and bring you through victorious. With God, hope is always a reasonable response to what we're going through. Even our old enemy death doesn't have the last word when God is with you. Irish poet and hymn writer Thomas Moore put it like this, "Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal."<sup>3</sup> David Crowder borrowed those hope-filled words for his song "Come as You Are."<sup>4</sup>

I don't know what you think about God or whether you even believe in God, but here's what the eyewitnesses to Jesus's resurrection believed: If you want to see what God is really like, look at Jesus. When we look at him, we see things about God that can change everything for us if we'll receive them.

"Show us the Father and that will be enough for us," one of Jesus's followers requested (John 14:8).

Jesus told him, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father"

(v. 9). So here's the truth: Jesus helps us see that God is not only the almighty Maker of heaven and earth, far above us. He's also One who is *with* us, a loving Father who cares for us. That's the God who is watching over you.

## DOWN ON THE TRACK

Derek Redmond was favored to win the men's four-hundred-meter race in the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain. When the gun sounded, he launched well. He was running smoothly when he heard a snap and felt a sharp pain in his leg about fifteen seconds into the race. He went down hard on the track with a hamstring injury.

What happened next is my favorite Olympic moment of all time. There was no way now that Derek would finish this race with a gold, silver, or even a bronze medal, but he was determined that he would finish. He rose from the track and hobbled and hopped toward the finish line in a magnificent demonstration of perseverance. With the world watching through misty eyes, he struggled to keep going. The camera was not focused on the winner now but on Derek Redmond. Even though he was in pain, he simply would not quit.

A commotion started on the sideline. Someone was pushing his way onto the track—Derek's father. He was present at the race, watching his son with the pride and love only a parent knows. Jim Redmond reached his son and put his arm around him. He walked with him, and together they crossed the finish line.<sup>5</sup>

I don't know what you're struggling through. Maybe in your disappointment or pain, you feel like God has abandoned you or that he's against you. If that's where you are, my heart goes out to you. That's a hard place to be. But I want you to know there is a God who loves you, a heavenly Father who is still for you. You don't have to suffer or grieve alone. He wants to come alongside you and be the help you need right now.

When I was my most helpless, the Lord helped me. When I had no way to care for myself or my family, he cared for us and supplied our need. When I was knocked down, in my weakness I trusted him and found strength beyond my own. Whatever you're going through, lean into him. Trust him to walk with you and give you what you need to make it through this day.

Here's what I know is true: Your heavenly Father is watching over you. He sees you down on the track. He's there to help you. He'll be the strength you need. Reach up for help. Leaning on him, you can go on and finish this race. Trust him. He is still for you.

You can be sure God is for you because . . .

**God is always watching over you.**

### PRAYER

Lord, despite what my circumstances may lead me to believe, despite the pain I feel right now, the truth is, you are for me. I know you see what I'm going through, and you care about me. Right now I choose to trust you. Thank you that nothing in my past, present, or future can ever separate me from your love. I pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.

### TALK IT OVER

1. Describe a time you questioned your faith because of something that happened (or is happening) to you or someone you love.
2. David wrote, "My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:2). Where do you need God's help now?

3. What would you say to encourage someone who feels they are alone going through a difficult situation?

A SONG TO LIFT YOUR SPIRIT

“Hold on to Me” by Lauren Daigle