
**3 WORDS
THAT WILL
CHANGE
YOUR LIFE**

*The Secret to Experiencing
the Joy of God's Presence*

MIKE NOVOTNY

3 WORDS THAT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE

*The Secret to Experiencing
the Joy of God's Presence*

MIKE NOVOTNY



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2020 by Time of Grace Ministry, Inc.

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019949901

ISBN 978-0-7642-3528-3

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked TLV are taken from the Tree of Life Version. © 2015 by the Messianic Jewish Family Bible Society. Used by permission of the Messianic Jewish Family Bible Society.

Illustrations by Bethany Vredeveld
Photo of Masada on page 131 © Baker Photo Archive
Cover design by Darren Welch Design

Author is represented by Jones Literary.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Kim, Brooklyn, and Maya—
Seeing you each day
reminds me how glorious it will be one day
to see GOD.

Contents

- 1. The Sentence That Can Change Your Life 7

Part 1 GOD

- 2. Our Biggest Problem and GOD's Bigger Solution 25
- 3. "This!" 46
- 4. Two Unexpected Ways to Meet GOD 68

Part 2 GOD Is

- 5. Hungry for Eternity 81
- 6. Sad Symptoms of Putting Your Hope in Hevel 99
- 7. Life in the Refuge 120

Part 3 GOD Is Here

- 8. The Best "Here" We Ever Had 147
- 9. What Most Christians Miss 168

Acknowledgments 183

Notes 187

About the Author 189

CHAPTER ONE

The Sentence That Can Change Your Life

There is a sentence that can change your life.

It contains just three words and nine letters, yet it is the key to less boredom, more blessing, less rush, more rest, less pacing, more peace, less fear, more faith, less guilt, more grit, less frustration, more satisfaction.

By the way, does that last sentence sound like the start of one of those too-good-to-be-true self-help books? The ones littered with page-turning verbs like “transform” and “revolutionize” and “kick-start”? The ones that promise to divorce-proof your marriage, land you your dream job as a gourmet-donut taste tester, and help you drop thirty pounds without quitting your donut gig?*

This is not that kind of book.

While the sentence is short and simple, the journey it takes you on is lifelong and complex. And though there will be plenty for you to do, this is much more about what Someone else did. Even more, it is about realizing who that Someone else is.

*That might be my next book. Because what person would divorce someone who brought home donuts every day?

So, are you ready for it? Take a deep breath, because I am about to tell you the sentence that could change your life.

GOD is here.

I told you! Did you get chills when you read it? Have you already texted your tattoo guy for your first-ever forehead ink? Did you run around the block like an Argentinean soccer announcer, screaming, “GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOD is here!”?

No, not even close?

You don’t even have a tattoo guy?

So . . . you just read it like any average sentence?

And your inner grammar nerd was very disappointed that I left the caps lock on?

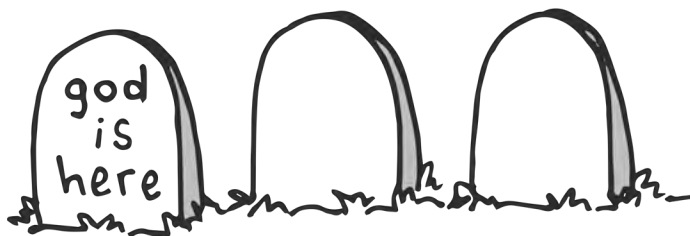
Well, I’m glad you’re reading this book. You need it as much as I do.

You see, zipping past that sentence is one of the worst things you could ever do to your soul. If even one of those three words is misunderstood, you will waste your life working and dating and studying and striving and spending and selling and planning and pushing to find that temporary something to satisfy your heart’s desire for an eternal Someone. Building a life around anything other than that sentence will buy the world’s most believable lie: One more whatever (dollar/compliment/“like”/victory/achievement/vacation/kid/cause/experience) will finally be enough. But that lie will keep you always one step away from being content with your current life. That lie will convince you to chase the wind even though you will never catch it.

Most Christians, like me, tend to misread those words in ways that rob us of the “full life” that Jesus came into the world to give (John 10:10). In other words, getting this sentence wrong will lead to a half-full life or a barely there life or no life at all. According to Jesus, messing up those three words can kill you.

Here are a few of the most deadly examples of what I mean. You might misread that sentence as . . .

Life Killer #1: *god is here*



Spiritual Life Killer #1

When we replace GOD with god—some generic, run-of-the-mill supernatural being, like “the universe” or a vague “higher power”—we miss the spiritual adrenaline rush of our Father’s glorious presence. We yawn while we say his sacred name, deceived by the normality of the letters. As a result, our hearts treat GOD like the yard-care guys who go door-to-door, the ones we wish would just leave us alone so we could get back to binge-watching *The Office*.

We all know the power and immediacy of *here*. When something exciting or thrilling or beautiful or long awaited is at last here, our emotions change even if our situation does not. We get excited and temporarily forget about our fears. We run to the mailbox without bothering to put on our shoes, as if the driveway were holy ground.

But most people don’t have that reaction to GOD because they forget to mentally turn on the caps lock. Instead, GOD becomes god—small, unexceptional, uninteresting. His name conjures up memories of being shushed in church and silenced with a ziplock full of Cheerios. Some have confused GOD with some distant universe that we can’t talk to but is tracking our daily karma. Others have felt suffocated by some white-bearded, cosmic judge whose only job was to catch and condemn us when we had sex without a ring on our finger.

How about you? When you hear that name, G-O-D, what pops into your mind? Where on your personal list of most exciting thoughts does GOD rank? High enough to spike your spiritual happiness, even if the circumstances of your life don’t change?

Your answers to those questions might be why you never were that passionate about the Christian faith. Or why you haven't regularly gone to church since the days when your mom forced you to. Or why you don't care all that much about what the Good Book calls a "GOD-pleasing life." Someone showed you a cheap imitation of GOD, an uninteresting god, and you had better things to do. Someone or something else seemed way more intriguing, so you ran after it instead of running after him.

If all I had seen was a god like that, I would have done the same thing.

Back in the mid-1900s, author A.W. Tozer chastised pastors who shrunk GOD into a mere god: "The poor little undersized, small-minded preacher gets up and begins to chatter about a God he has made in his own image, and then I'm supposed to want to go to heaven and sit beside the throne of a God I could not respect on earth?"¹

In other words, who cares about heaven if only god lives there?

Many Christians make a similar, but not so blatant, mistake with the sentence I shared with you. They may capitalize the first letter of his name, turning god into God, but their hearts stop far short of the emotional reaction he deserves. They use all the right words to describe him—all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present, holy—but their familiarity breeds an unintentional contempt.

I once surveyed a group of about fifty Christian teenagers, the vast majority of whom had not only grown up in church but had over a decade of Christian education. For ten school years, Monday to Friday, they had read the Scriptures, gone to chapel, memorized Bible passages, and sung songs like "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!" If you gave them a quiz, they could have easily checked the right boxes to describe GOD.

But I asked them a simple question: "What would make this year the happiest year of your life?"

Their answers came back as fast as the smiles spread across their faces: "Graduating with honors." "Getting to the playoffs

for baseball.” “An acceptance letter from my top choice college.” “Making the JV2 football team.”

Do you know whose name wasn’t mentioned by those fifty young Christians? Not one single time? GOD’s.*

Apparently, in the day-to-day routine of practices and pop quizzes, not one of those Christians thought that GOD was the right place to find lasting joy and the confidence that every teenager craves.

I can’t throw stones, though, because I do that too. I know all the right theological words to describe GOD, but I forget the weight of his name so quickly. In the blur of making breakfast, returning emails, and battling the army of weeds attacking my yard, I end up with an orthodox God but not a glorious GOD.

The results of turning off the caps lock are tragic. Happiness deflates. Joy leaks. Peace goes missing. Love grows stale. Confidence hides. Contentment stays home. Satisfaction seems like a myth. Heaven quits being worth it. Repentance seems like a raw deal. Sin seems so much better. Life ends up lifeless. Death gets back its sting.

When someone tries to comfort us with the Bible’s best promise, “Don’t be afraid. GOD is here!” we brush it off with, “I know, but . . .” Our hearts ache for something, because we’ve shrunk Someone.

But what if we remember just how truly big GOD is, a GOD so awe-inspiring that his presence makes every other blessing unnecessary for our peace, hope, and joy? What if we cured that slow leak in our hearts by magnifying, exalting, acclaiming, praising, proclaiming, and lifting up the name of GOD every hour of every day? After all, this practice is what Jesus meant when he talked about “hallowing” GOD’s name.

Imagine how our lives would be different if God became GOD to us, far and away the best example of every character trait you love in people. The most glorious, forgiving, friendly, strong, smart, pure, patient, powerful, accepting, including, honest, encouraging, compassionate, creative, kind, thrilling, adventurous,

* In their defense, a fifteen-year-old me would have defined happiness as an inexhaustible Taco Bell gift card.

exciting, inspiring person you could fathom. What if we saw every funny, thrilling, relaxing, interesting, camera-worthy moment in life as an invitation to remember “GOD is even better than this!”?

Then we would have to keep the caps lock on.

Then our God would turn into GOD.

Then the promise of his presence would change our lives.

Life Killer #2: *GOD will be here*



Spiritual Life Killer #2

A second way to miss the power of that sentence is to think of GOD’s presence as something that *will be* instead of something that already *is*.

I noticed this when I listened to another group of teenagers who publicly confessed their Christian faith before our church. As part of that celebration, we make short videos where each teen personally answers the question “What does your faith mean to you?”

Want to guess what they said? Kid after kid (after kid after kid) echoed the same words, “My faith means I will go to heaven when I die.” After the twelfth kid repeated that answer, I stood up in the back and shouted,* “So GOD doesn’t do you any good until you’re dead?”†

GOD wants your faith to bless you right here and right now.

* Well, I didn’t actually stand up and shout anything. I just smiled at the kids, ate cake, and thought of this insightful line long after the event was done.

† And then it dawned on me that we grown-ups were the ones who taught them to see Christianity that way. Ugh.

Faith is more than your FastPass for the Better Place Theme Park. It is not just a key to the pearly gates that you will one day use, but for now just try not to lose.*

Can you imagine if faith only gave you access to GOD in the future? How terrifying would that make today?

Imagine if this glorious GOD was waiting for you then and there but was not present here and now. Imagine going through chemo or a divorce or middle school without him. Imagine trying to deal with the anxiety or heal from the abuse or forgive the friend who betrayed you without GOD at your side. Walking through life's darkest valleys would be terrifying if we tweaked "GOD is here!" to "GOD will be here."

But a GOD-less life is only in the Christian's imagination. Listen to Israel's King David confess his hope in Psalm 23:4, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

You are. David's fearless life was founded on the present reality of GOD's presence right here, right now.

Of course, there is a distinction between being with GOD here on earth and being with GOD there in heaven. This earth is still broken in hundreds of ways that break our hearts and make us long for the life to come. Heaven is free from clinical anxiety, postpartum depression, social awkwardness, pancreatic cancer, pounding headaches, fake news, petty arguments, and the billions of other proofs that heaven is not a place on earth . . . yet.†

But the greatest part about heaven is available, in part, here and now: the presence of GOD.

The apostle Paul understood this truth: "Rejoice in the Lord always. . . . The Lord is near. . . . And the peace of God, which

* To quote comedian Jim Gaffigan, "Am I the only one who finds it odd that heaven has gates? . . . What kind of neighborhood is heaven in?" (From "Jim Gaffigan - Jesus - Beyond the Pale," March 13, 2009, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2k_9mXpNdgU&list=PL26BC266A3820250B&index=2&t=0s.)

† With all due respect to '80s star Belinda Carlisle.

transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts. . . . I have learned the secret of being content” (Philippians 4:4–5, 7, 12).

Always rejoicing. Hearts guarded by peace. The secret of being content. How is that possible? By believing “the Lord is near.” GOD is here!

What if our lives were less of a waiting game and more of a game of hide-and-seek, searching for the GOD who is here but, in part, hidden? What if we sought GOD right now, believing he could be found here, now?

We might end up with more joy.

We might end up with a peace that transcends any situation we may face.

We might end up discovering the secret of being content.

Life Killer #3: *GOD is there*



Spiritual Life Killer #3

The third misreading of this life-changing sentence is that GOD is present but only over there, with other people. We assume that a GOD like that would not want to hang around people like us.

In a way, this lie is logical. Sin has the built-in power to push people apart. Just think of how often this happens in our lives:

- You were best friends, but then she hit on the guy you told her you were into. Now you avoid her offers to go out and grab drinks after class.

- You were tight with a co-worker, but then he lied and took all the credit for the project you did together. Now you feel your gut twisting every time his name pops up in your inbox.
- You would love to come home during spring break, but your dad's alcohol addiction has made home where your heart isn't, so you find excuses to stay on campus year-round.
- You were loving your small-group Bible study, but when your private confession became public gossip, you found it hard to go back.
- You felt so close to your spouse, but then you found the search history that proved they had eyes for someone else. Now your heart feels locked away from the one you were meant to be intimate with.

Sin does that. It separates us from each other. And it has the same effect in our relationship with GOD. The Bible puts it like this, "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you" (Isaiah 59:2).

A few years ago, a woman who had been regularly attending our church called me to explain why she was not going to be there the following Sunday. "Well, pastor, my ex-boyfriend called the other night and . . . well . . . I know I shouldn't have, but . . ." She went on to explain the temptation she faced and failed to resist.

But her next words were the ones that struck me. "So, obviously, I can't come to church." I asked her to explain the "obviously," since her logic wasn't obvious to me. Her reply, in essence, was, "Because GOD is there."

Feeling far from holy because of her sin, she felt she could not gather around GOD's holy Word with GOD's holy people. She believed her night of short-term pleasure put a long-term pause on her closeness to GOD. Perhaps GOD would want to be there with them, but definitely not here with her.

I wonder if you have ever felt the same way. Perhaps you question, deep in your heart, whether GOD really is here with you. Whether he has stuck around after all you have done. Whether he decided to lock the door to “here” after you messed up for the millionth time. Maybe you think about your own embarrassing behavior—the drinking, the promiscuity, the lack of courage in sharing your faith, the endless desire to be right, the controlling behavior in your relationships, the snap judgments about people’s motives, the natural ability to disrespect anyone in authority, the people-pleasing insecurity, the lack of self-control with spending, the critical spirit toward your sister, the pick-and-choose approach to the Christian commandments, the years without prayers (besides the ones for GOD to bail you out of trouble), the years of going through the motions at church, the lack of love for your enemies, the lack of love for GOD. Maybe all of that has left you with a nagging suspicion that GOD is over there with those people and no longer right here with the person you see in the mirror.

This might seem unchristian of me to say, but, in a sense, I am happy that you feel that way. It proves that you believe in GOD. Not in an indifferent, unjust, impotent, shrug-of-the-shoulders god who is too busy styling his long white beard to care deeply about your decisions. Your fear suggests you believe in a holy, righteous, radiant GOD who cares immensely about your sin, because he cares immensely about the people you have sinned against—even when the person you’ve sinned against is yourself.

There are worse things than feeling ashamed about shameful things you have done.

However, I don’t want you to get stuck there, because GOD is much more than a sin hater. He is also a sinner lover. He is not some Santa God who’s keeping a list of who’s naughty and nice, or some Karma God who “helps those who help themselves.” He is a GOD of grace, of undeserved love given to the undeserving. Grace given to the woman who didn’t feel worthy to come to worship. Grace given to a man like me who has messed up so much, so many times. Grace given to the sinner you see every time you

brush your teeth. This is the grace that gets us from there to here. This is the love that tells sin to pack its bags so that we can check in to the place where GOD *is*. And, because grace is grace, we will never have to leave.

What if we believed that? What if we felt this truth deep in our hearts?

We might discover a GOD who saved us while we were yet sinners.

We just might begin to understand this thing called grace and, better yet, live it out.

We might grasp the true power of true love.

In the final section of this book, I want to prove that Jesus was passionate about getting you into GOD's presence. He lived, died, and rose so that this sentence could be true not just for them, but also for you: GOD is here! The Bible has dozens of ways to say it (saved, forgiven, redeemed, reconciled, justified, born-again, etc.), but every word about Jesus' work leads to the same stunning conclusion. There is no more distance between you and GOD. No more "there."

For every last Christian, the struggling *you* included, GOD is here!

And since GOD is here, so is unfailing love for you, unwavering friendship with you, constant affirmation over you, continual purpose in you, abiding acceptance of you, and never-ending community alongside you. The very things your heart craves are found in the ever-present GOD who is *here*.

The Psalm That Saved Me

Though I had followed Jesus for decades, I had somehow missed the life Jesus died to give me. It was right there in my Bible, in the songs my church sang, in the lectures my professors gave, but I missed it. Until I met Asaph.

Asaph was the singer-songwriter who wrote Psalm 73, an ancient song of worship from the Old Testament. His lyrics are surprisingly transparent. He admitted how angry he felt that the

lives of people who did not follow GOD's rules flourished while he suffered. His thoughts were so bitter that he called himself "a brute beast" (v. 22).

But then something changed. Asaph remembered to think much of GOD—to revere GOD. Out of the overflow of his enlightened heart, he sang the words that sent me on a spiritual journey that continues to this day. Asaph asked, "Whom have I in heaven but you?" (v. 25).

That sentence stunned me. When Asaph thought of heaven, he didn't first think of being reunited with loved ones. He thought of GOD. A GOD so good that he made heaven, well, heavenly.

But Asaph wasn't done. He continued, "And earth has nothing I desire besides you" (v. 25).



Asaph's One Wish

That sentence doubled my stunned-ness. Asaph didn't desire romance or fame or achievements or anything, apparently, besides GOD. How could that be? Didn't his heart desire the things of this world? Doesn't yours? Doesn't mine?

Actually no. We don't really desire things of this world, because none of us longs for what fails in the end. We don't want temporary love or friendship that falls apart after a few months. We want something that lasts. We desire what endures forever.

Like . . . GOD.

Asaph's desires taught me something about my own heart. Namely, that I would never be satisfied with temporary blessings. I would always crave more. Or fear that I would end up with less. Nothing short of the eternal GOD would be enough for my soul.

Asaph then affirmed my conclusion, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (v. 26).

Where did Asaph find his strength? Simply from being with GOD. And since that portion would last forever, Asaph discovered the source of unquenchable joy.

With the secret of contentment now known, Asaph busted out into a happy dance and invited you to join him in his joy, "But as for me, it is good to be near God" (v. 28).

To be near GOD is so good. It is so good to know GOD is here.

This psalm saved me from sitting around, waiting to die, and riding the sickening roller coaster of life's circumstances. Instead, I learned how to get up and go after GOD, how to seek him until I saw him, which led me to find satisfaction in him. With GOD in mind, I reread the entire Bible, highlighting every word, phrase, and passage about GOD.

I nearly bled my highlighter collection dry.*

The theme was everywhere in the Word—GOD's name, GOD's glory, GOD's holiness. Earthly adjectives like "failing" and "temporary" contrasted with divine descriptions like "enduring" and "everlasting." I saw how the commands to praise, magnify, worship, exalt, lift up, and glorify GOD all urge us to ditch our dinky versions of god and think much, much more highly of GOD. I

* Having a highlighter collection is required for getting your gold card in Bible nerdery.

noticed the descriptions of heaven (GOD is here!) and hell (GOD is not here). I began to hear the drumbeat of joy and gladness that is constantly connected to GOD's presence. I started to value the security and safety of hiding our happiness behind the rock-solid walls of GOD, our refuge and rock and tower and fortress and stronghold and hiding place. I discovered the invitation—for both those new to the faith and those who are longtime followers of Jesus—to seek GOD, see GOD, and know GOD more than ever before.

And when I closed my Bible, I started to hear the same theme everywhere in the world—I opened my eyes and ears to popular culture and heard them—so many of them!—aching for GOD. From Kendrick Lamar to Katy Perry, Alexander Hamilton to Tom Brady, *The Greatest Showman* to *Lego Friends*. Everyone, everywhere was searching for the same thing—to find something as good as GOD that would be as constantly present as GOD promised to be.

The connections between Scripture and culture were so many that I struggled to verbalize what I had found. Even my wife admitted, “I think I know what you are saying, but . . .” Like spaghetti strands stuck to each other, every idea was glued to the next, and I couldn't separate them enough to help others digest the dish. Summarizing Asaph's idea was like asking an elderly man on his sixtieth wedding anniversary to “take ten seconds and tell us how you feel about your wife.”

After a few bumbling attempts to get others excited about this book,* I ended up with a one-word elevator pitch—GOD! This book is essentially about GOD. But I'd say that last word in an abnormal way, with bright eyes and a broad smile and outstretched arms. “My book is about . . . GOD!” I knew I was getting closer when a co-worker heard my answer and replied, “GOD? Like with the caps lock on?”

* Which ended with glazed eyes and forced smiles and “Wow, that sounds . . . um . . . interesting. I'll have to read that.”

Exactly. This book is not about god or God. It's about GOD! And that GOD is here!

That sentence has changed me. It still is changing me. Admittedly, I have a long way to go. My soul deals with its own dementia, and I think too little of GOD's presence too often. But, day by day, the Holy Spirit is opening my eyes to the glorious GOD who is with me always. My highs have gotten much higher and longer and my lows are much shorter and not as low. And I have found life—abundant, amazing life. I have tasted and seen, and I swear that the Lord is good.

I want more of it. More of him. Much more.

That is where I want to take you in this book. I want to open your eyes to the Scriptures that have always been right there in front of you but that you might have missed. And I want to connect more of your daily experiences to the divine, so that your synapses send a thousand push notifications to your soul. GOD is here.

In the end, I pray that both of us can join Asaph in his astounding claim that there is only one thing we truly desire. And that thing is not far, far away, unreachable, and impossible. Through the love of our Father, the sacrifice of his Son, and the work of his Spirit, that thing is as close as your breath.

I pray you will start to think the greatest thought—GOD is here!

Life Giver: GOD Is Here!

Recently, three sad kids from my church experienced a glimpse of the joy that sentence brings into our lives. Their mom was serving in the military, stationed on the other side of the earth about eight time zones away from here. Like most kids in their situation, they missed her intensely and counted down the days until her return.

Little did they know, Mom had planned a surprise.

One day, on a visit to Grandpa's house, the kids walked in and gasped at the giant gift-wrapped box in the living room, big enough

to hide a hundred stuffed animals. Family members who were in on the surprise got out their phones as the kids tore open the gift and discovered . . . Mom!

Can you picture their three little faces as they threw their arms around Mom's neck? Can you feel their joy as they pressed their noses against hers? Can you hear them squealing, "Mommy is here!"?

The presence of the right person changed everything.

In the pages to come, I invite you to join me on a journey to unwrap the ultimate present Jesus died and rose to give you. Or, to put it in a single sentence, I invite you to put your hope in the promise that . . .

GOD is here.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Which of the three "life killers" resonated the most with you? Explain your answer to a Christian friend.
2. When you hear the name G-O-D, what pops into your mind? If you had to give your mental image of GOD a letter grade (with A-plus being as exciting as it gets), which grade would your GOD get?
3. Read Psalm 73, the ancient song that sent me on a journey to find GOD. List all the connections you see between this psalm and the main points of this chapter.