

shift

Changing Our Focus to See
the Presence of God

Abby McDonald



LEAFWOOD
P U B L I S H E R S
an imprint of Abilene Christian University Press

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PUBLISHERS

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ISBN 978-1-68426-310-3 | LCCN 2019039875

Printed in the United States of America

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Published in association with The Blythe Daniel Agency, Inc., PO Box 64197, Colorado Springs, CO 80962.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: McDonald, Abby, author.

Title: Shift : changing our focus to see the presence of God / Abby McDonald.

Description: Abilene, Texas : Leafwood Publishers, an imprint of Abilene Christian

University Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019039875 | ISBN 9781684263103 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Presence of God. | God—Knowableness. | God (Christianity)—Omnipresence.

Classification: LCC BT180.P6 M33 2020 | DDC 231.7—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019039875>

Cover design by ThinkPen Design | Interior text design by Sandy Armstrong, Strong Design

Leafwood Publishers is an imprint of Abilene Christian University Press

ACU Box 29138, Abilene, Texas 79699

1-877-816-4455 | www.leafwoodpublishers.com

To Chris,

My love and my biggest fan.

I love doing this wild adventure of faith with you.

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Introduction

I had no idea what a 4D movie was, but I was about to find out. It was the middle of Christmas break, and my parents had just bought our little family tickets to *The Polar Express*. In 4D.

Everything appeared to be like a normal 3D movie. The attendant handed us glasses to view the show. We entered a theater that looked similar to most other movie theaters I'd been to. Then, the show started, and my seat jolted. It felt like I was actually on a train. When the waiters danced through the air with hot chocolate, I could smell it. Ice blasted in my face when the train skidded across the frozen lake.

The whole experience was unlike any movie I'd ever been to, but all my youngest son saw was a blur of shapes in front of him. His strong-willed, three-year-old self refused to put on the glasses. So, while he could feel and smell the sensations of the adventure,

he couldn't see it. Not clearly, anyway. He completely missed the visual part of the show.

Do you ever feel as though you're missing God? Perhaps you had a strong sense of his presence at the beginning of your relationship, but you hit a wall. Or maybe you're picking up the pieces of a deferred dream, wondering if you heard God wrong when you chased after it. Maybe you're in the thick of a personal or a family crisis, and you don't know how God could be in it. I think no matter how long we've been following Jesus, we eventually reach a place where we wonder, "Where is he? Did I miss him? Was that really him at all?"

These questions are what set me on the journey we're about to embark upon. There have been long, dark seasons of my life when I reached for God, but my hands came up empty. I fought against the silence and I cried out to him, wondering why he'd abandoned me. I didn't understand how I could do all the things the characteristic Christian girl would do, but still be wandering through a wilderness.

As I searched the Scriptures, prayed continually, and thought about you, dear reader, I became convinced that we don't have to wait until we're on the other side of the struggle, the wilderness, or the tired monotony of our days to know God. We can know him right here, right now. In the middle of the trouble and the confusion. But how?

What if we altered our perspective? What if, like my son who refused to wear the glasses, we're using the wrong set of tools? There's a shift that has to take place. We have to change not only how we view him, but how we look for him.

This adventure is the adventure I invite you to take with me. We will study the Psalms of David, who repeatedly felt deserted by God, and look at the shift that takes place in his heart. We will look at the first disciples and consider what made them follow

a person who hadn't yet shown his power. Then, we will look at Jesus himself and examine the unique relationship he had with the Father. A relationship that fueled his mission, his purpose, and his effectiveness here on earth.

When we finish, we won't be the same. My prayer is that we'll see God with a new set of eyes and a new gait of fresh confidence. And what's even better? Others will see him too. They'll see him as we share our vision and be inspired to look for him even in the shadows. This is what newfound faith can do. Will you join me?

1

Invisible or Not?

My husband has an uncanny ability to notice people others don't. Whether it's the person with car trouble on the side of the road or a neighbor no one else seems to care about, Chris sees. He extends a helping hand when it's needed. Sometimes, this involves me and means putting my own schedule aside. *Sigh*. This happened a few months ago when my plan was to have a quiet evening at home after a crazy, chaotic week of school activities.

I'll be honest. I didn't want to have our neighbor over for dinner. It was the middle of the week in mid-September, and I was tired. The kids were still adjusting to their new classes, and I was adjusting to all that comes with a new school year. The middle-aged man who lived next door was single, quirky, and difficult to make conversation with. But he was also grieving after recently

losing his dad, and my husband offered a hand of friendship. So I agreed. A roast simmered in the slow cooker.

About thirty minutes before dinnertime, I realized we were running low on drinks, so I made a quick trip to the store. I raced through the aisles, trying to make sure I got home before the timer beeped. As I was coming back up the steps into the house, I swung the door open and my heart nearly stopped as I heard a loud, “Hey, hey, hey!”

My neighbor was sitting on his walker, right beside the door.

Grace, Abby. Grace. Put on your grace face, I kept telling myself on repeat.

He labored up to his feet, and I helped him get inside before finishing dinner prep while he made himself at home.

Later, as we sat around the table eating, we all made casual conversation and my kids were their usual, amicable selves. They wanted to tell Don about their toys, their video games, and the instruments they played. I could tell he wasn't particularly interested, but he nodded and was patient as they recalled each detail about their favorites. There was something else about him, though. Something in his face that made my heart sink.

It was his eyes. His eyes were completely void of any light or joy. I could feel his loneliness and despair as though they were shadows hanging over me. I chided myself for even questioning the idea to have him over for dinner. And silently, I prayed for him.

I prayed God would transform the heart of this man who turned his back on God and the church years ago. I prayed God would use my family to soften those layers of scar tissue, and for the Spirit to move in an undeniable way.

Two weeks later, he accepted an invitation to go to Bible study with my husband. This was his first “yes” after years of my husband asking. My heart rejoiced. I could see an immediate answer to prayer, and I praised God for the work he was doing. My husband

saw it too, and described the way Don was opening up in their small men's group. We sensed a door opening, and anticipated the change that would take place in Don's life.

Then there was a shift. We didn't see him sitting in his favorite spot on the porch one afternoon. This was unusual, because he made a habit of calling out to us from his chair each afternoon. But we assumed he was napping or watching TV, and we went on with our evening.

It turns out he wasn't. He wasn't inside or even down the street at the neighborhood market. He was at the hospital. The next day, my husband received a text from his caretaker. He was in the ICU with a brain bleed. The slow, building pressure on his brain started after a fall that happened weeks earlier, but he had never gone to a doctor.

Within two weeks, he was gone. Even though the doctors expected him to make a full recovery. Even though he was responsive and alert when Chris visited him. My husband and I bowed our heads at the same dinner table where he sat weeks earlier, unable to comprehend the news of his passing.

Did we misunderstand what God was doing? Were my husband's efforts to reach out to this man in vain? We don't have the answers. We don't know if Don called on the name of the Lord in his final hours, or if his spirit is at rest.

The suddenness of the experience jarred us and left us walking in darkness for days. The circle of people who cared about him was so small, we had no one to look to for answers. We had no one to ask about his demeanor before the slip. We had no contact to ask if his eyes lit with hope during the hours spent in the hospital. When FedEx would deliver mail or neighbors would ask about the lights that stayed on at his house, we felt at a complete loss. Did anyone know him? Did anyone care?

Experiences like this one can leave us reeling, searching for answers. We catch a glimpse of something God is doing in the heavenly realms, but then things don't turn out the way we think they should. We sense God moving and working in someone's life, but then a door slams shut before we have the chance to see real change.

These moments have the ability to crush our faith. We wonder where God is and why he isn't responding to the cries of our hearts. We want others to see his power and his ability to change a life, but he seems distant. Unresponsive.

How do we keep our eyes locked on the Author and Finisher of our faith even when our faith is faltering? How do we keep our focus fixed on the Savior even when the person we prayed for isn't saved? We need to shift our perspective. We need to look at the work he's already doing instead of the answer we haven't received. God was, in fact, working. Others saw it. My husband and I just didn't see it at the time.

If you've ever walked with God through difficult seasons, you've likely asked some of these same questions. Questions don't mean absence of faith, but show we are growing in our faith. We're seeing how God makes his presence known in our lives.

One of the beautiful things about God is that he can handle our questions and doubts. He doesn't turn away from our uncertainty, but invites us to know him more. He invites us to look beyond what we can see and get to know who he is as a Father, a person, and a friend. Even when we don't understand what he's doing, we can know his heart as he knows ours. He honors the way we earnestly seek him in the midst of our doubt and grief.

Trusting the Guide

When I was a little girl, our family traveled to the Blue Ridge Mountains every summer. One of our favorite hiking spots was

Mt. Pisgah, which is distinguished by a huge television broadcast tower at the peak. At the base of the mountain, the view of this metal and wire steeple is unobstructed. It was our beacon at the top—our goal. There was no questioning when we arrived at our final destination, because the summit had a clear marker.

However, once we started along the trail, the view of the tower was obscured. Trees towered all around us. We could see the trail in front of us, but our destination was only discernable at various clearings on our way to the top. We had to trust that those who mapped the trail knew what they were doing. We paid attention to signs telling us which way to go. We knew our stopping place was still there, but our faith was not in what we could see. Our faith came from what we saw when we had a clear, unobstructed view, but the obstacles didn't keep us from pressing ahead. They simply made the hike more challenging.

Often in life, our faith is like the trek up that mountain. We know Jesus and commit our lives to following him. Sometimes the life-altering experience of salvation is so transformative, we feel as though we could reach out our hand and touch him. During those first few months and maybe years of walking in the Light, we can't wait to see what he'll do next. God is real. We know it because we have tasted and seen that he is good. If he could move us and transform us in such a tangible way, how could he not be? His work in our hearts is all the evidence we need. But over time, do we have a shift in how we view our faith?

Eventually we encounter a rough season or two or more. Our prayers for a loved one aren't answered. A financial crisis hits out of nowhere, and we wonder how we're going to make it to the next paycheck. Family suffers from illness, and the pain we watch them endure sends our faith spiraling. Where is God? Is he still there even when we don't see the outcome we desire?

During these times, it is crucial that we trust our Guide. But how? How can we raise our sights up and see him like the tower on the peak when our view is obscured by life's difficulties? Like the hike up the mountain trail, we must rely on the visual markers he gives us. Even when the trail gets rocky and we can't see the summit, we must remember what compelled us to follow him in the first place. Was it his love? His grace? The lack of an answer to our prayers does not mean those attributes have changed. We must have faith that he knows the way even when we don't see where we're headed. We must trust that our Savior sees us even when we can't see the outcome. A faith that only propels us forward when we receive a clear answer will not keep us in motion for long. We need faith in the unknown. Faith in the unseen. Faith when the fog is heavy and obscures any view of the summit.

What if the struggle isn't a signal to quit, but a sign to keep going? What if the seasons when we wonder where he is are the times when he is doing some of his mightiest work?

We may not be able to see what he's doing or receive the answer to our prayer, but when we shift our view and stick close to him, others see him. They see him in our walk. They see him in our commitment to pursuing him even when the way isn't clear. As we pray and follow his commands, his Spirit is evident in our lives. Often, we're not even aware of the way his light is shining in the midst of our difficulties.

The Work We Don't See

In the last few chapters of the Gospel of John, Jesus spends much time preparing his disciples for what's to come. He teaches them, eats with them, and prays for them. He walks with them and displays the ultimate act of humility and the heart of a servant in washing their feet.

Jesus knew what was to come. He knew his closest friends would be grieving and asking questions they'd be unable to answer. In one night, he was betrayed by one of his own followers, denied by the person (Peter) who said he'd die for him, and sentenced to be killed by those who had witnessed his miracles. Murdered for a crime he never committed.

I find it no mistake that one of the last teachings Jesus gave to his disciples was about the vine and the branches. In some of his opening sentences, Jesus says, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me" (John 15:4 ESV). Jesus goes on to say if we abide in him, we "will bear much fruit" (John 15:5). He doesn't say we might or we may bear fruit. He says we will. There is no question about it. The key is abiding in him. We must focus on him instead of our own tools and abilities.

My brother-in-law is an avid hunter. Every fall is hunting season, and he spends months scouting the forest surrounding his dad's land. Years ago, he learned a valuable lesson about hitting your target. It's a lesson many newbies miss. You don't focus on your sights, which are at the end of the shotgun barrel. You keep your eyes set on your target. It involves a shift in our natural tendency. A shift in perspective. But the payoff is huge.

Like those new hunters, our normal inclination is to look at what we can control. We see our own weapons apart from the Spirit. Even when we feel the nudge to do something for God, we try to predict what will happen or wonder what the results will be. But instead of seeing only what we have in our hands, God is asking us to concentrate on the Spirit. So how do we do this? What do we know about the Spirit, and how do we shift our focus to him?

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If we dig into Scripture, we learn these truths about the Spirit:

- He guides us. (Acts 8:29)
- He testifies about Jesus. (John 15:26)
- He gives us strength. (Eph. 3:16)
- He confirms what is true. (Rom. 9:1)

When we live empowered by these truths and adjust our focus to see the Spirit's potential instead of our capabilities, it not only changes our lives, but can impact the lives of others as well. The effects cascade to those around us as they can see the work of the Spirit transforming our hearts and minds. They see the results too, as we're filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Even when we aren't aware of the ways we're making an impact, the influence remains.

And what's even more beautiful? God sees, right? He sees, and others see a change in us. In the same way his disciples spread the news of his resurrection with courage and resolve after Jesus ascended to heaven, we can exhibit courage and great resolve even when we don't fully see where things are going.

We are one of the primary ways an invisible
God makes himself visible to others.

We extend compassion to those who are hurting, even when it feels risky. We encourage each other and pray for each other, even when we don't think our prayers sound educated or effective. We continue believing and seeking him; and if we don't see the answer or outcome we hoped would come, we seek him more. We are one of the primary ways an invisible God makes himself visible to others. When we do these things, Christ's love is made complete in us (1 John 4:12).

Others see him because they see our devotion in the face of uncertainty. They see him because we continue to alter our perspective toward the truths we know instead of the responses we don't yet perceive.

The Answer We Know

After Don passed, we spent weeks watching his caretaker and various others remove his belongings from his house. My stomach felt like it was twisted in knots, and I grieved the man who used to greet us from his front porch each day. I wondered whether anyone else saw the value of his life as his possessions were taken and sold to strangers, one by one.

Chris and I still have a lot of unanswered questions about our neighbor. But there are many things we do know, and we find comfort remembering them.

We know God called my husband to reach out to Don. He was completely alone after his dad passed, and he needed a friend. More than a friend, he needed a believer in his life who would point him toward God's truth.

We also know Don's heart was softening toward the church community. After years of staying away because of previous hurts, he was making friends with followers of Christ. Whether he was aware of it or not, his presence at the study made an impact. People noticed Don, and they saw the boldness Chris showed in extending an invitation to someone who was resistant. They saw that God is working even through the noes we receive. He's working during the moments we feel opposition and discouragement and in the moments we're not sure whether we're making a difference.

Most of all, we know Chris was obedient. And because he was obedient, his focus shifted from being self-empowered to Spirit-empowered. In Luke 10, an expert of the law tried to test Jesus, asking what he needed to do to inherit eternal life.

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He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

Even when he didn't see any indication that God was working and moving in Don's heart, my husband loved his neighbor. Even when he wasn't sure if his invitations would ever be accepted, he continued to step forward in faith. For months, he invited Don to church not sure if he would ever say yes. Until one day, he finally did.

This acceptance may have seemed small to some, but to us it was huge. It meant that when we step forward and do what God is asking us to do, he moves in ways only he can. Even when it doesn't seem like anything is happening. Even when it appears as though nothing has changed.

Each “no” led to a “yes.” And the “yes” was our goal. The “yes” was everything.

In watching my husband take a step when he was unsure what the outcome would be, I was encouraged to do the same. I messaged our pastor's wife a Bible study I'd felt called to lead for months, but had been putting off. I began to reach out to others despite being introverted and hesitant about how they'd respond. I realized we never know how much time a person is going to have, and we should seize the opportunities we have to show kindness and compassion. I learned that sometimes loving others well means stepping outside of what feels comfortable. It means extending grace and empathy instead of assuming I know what someone is going through. When we do these things, others see Jesus because the Spirit is moving. The more we follow his leading, the more our lives become a living example of his power. They may not know what they're witnessing at the time or why our lives are different, but they're drawn to it.

A decision to follow Jesus is never in vain. Even when we don't know the end of the story. Even when we're not sure whether our prayers were answered. Our God is far bigger than the things we do or don't know. And as much as we loved our neighbor and wanted to see his heart transformed, God loved him even more. He loved him more than we could imagine.

When we make the choice to trust God even when we're unsure of the outcome and obey him even when we face doubt, lives are changed. A small act of kindness can be a big arrow pointing others toward God's character. People notice the way we live and the love we have for others. They see how we care about the person everyone else overlooks. They see the attentiveness we show to those who need help.

A small act of kindness can be a big arrow pointing others toward God's character.

The act of remaining in the vine that Jesus speaks of in John 15 is a constant process. It is a daily decision to shift our perspective and stay focused on the next step God asked us to take instead of trying to predict the aftermath.

Instead of asking ourselves:

How is this going to turn out?

Can I control the outcome?

What will this cost me?

We ask ourselves:

Is this something God is asking me to do?

Can he do the heart work/the miracle?

Will my obedience point others to Jesus?

If we're Spirit-empowered instead of me-empowered, then we can know with certainty that regardless of what we see, God is in it. Even if we're anxious or unsure, we can take the next step he is asking us to take. Why? Because there are people who, like Don,

have spent their lives running from God. When they think of God, they don't picture someone who gave up his own life to save them. They don't picture someone who would go to any lengths to have a relationship with them. They see those who have hurt them. They see people who proclaimed the name of Jesus but were far from him in their actions and the way they lived their lives. A name that is beautiful to us has been associated with hurt to these souls who have no idea who he is. But God is reaching out to them through you and saying, "Show them who I really am. Show them what I'm really like."

Our job is not to try to find the final result or ending. Our job is to do what God is asking us to do, and to be confident that he will do the rest. We believe the Guide who knows the way, and we shift our focus and questions toward the truths we know about him instead of the numerous detours, rocks, and bumps along the path.

Each time we look to him instead of our own limitations, a transformation is taking place. It takes time. As a matter of fact, the change lasts an entire lifetime, and we may not always see it while it's happening. But we can be sure he's working, even when we don't see an immediate outcome. When we choose to love in the name of Jesus, the ending will always be beautiful. And at a moment when we may least expect it, we'll see the evidence we crave.

Adjusting Our Lens

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1. Are there areas in your life where your focus is on final destination, but God may want you to simply take the next step? What do you think that next step might be? Pray about it and write down the answer you receive. Go through the exercise

outlined in this chapter and ask the questions to determine if you are self-empowered or Spirit-empowered. Then, tell another believer you trust and commit to taking that next step, whatever it may be. Even if it's simply inviting someone over for dinner.

2. Has your vision become obscured in the ascent? Do the bleak circumstances or lack of answers around you keep you from seeing God? Spend some time thinking about one of the first aspects of God's character that drew you to him. His love? His steadfastness? Find a Scripture corresponding with that truth about him and meditate on it.
3. What does Jesus mean in John 15:4; and how can we remain in him, even when we can't see the final destination? What impact do you think remaining in him would have on your faith and those around you?
4. Spend some time thinking about a point in your life when another person impacted your faith in a personal way. What was it about their walk that made an impression on you? Do you think they were aware of it?