

*Nancy Ortberg is not like Most-of-Us. At least, she's not like the Most-of-Us that experts tell us we are supposed to be. Because she's not like Most-of-Us, she's got something to say to All-of-Us.*

**SCOT MCKNIGHT**

Author of *The Jesus Creed*

# *Looking for God*



slightly unorthodox,

highly unconventional, and entirely unexpected

thoughts about faith

NANCY ORTBERG

# ADVANCE PRAISE FOR **LOOKING FOR GOD**

"Wow. Whether you're a theologian, a regular churchgoer, a nominal Christian, or just curious about this Jesus guy everyone is talking about, *Looking for God* will overwhelm you. It is remarkably profound, poignant, and insightful, and written with an uncommon and inspired sense of joy. I couldn't stop reading it. Amazing."

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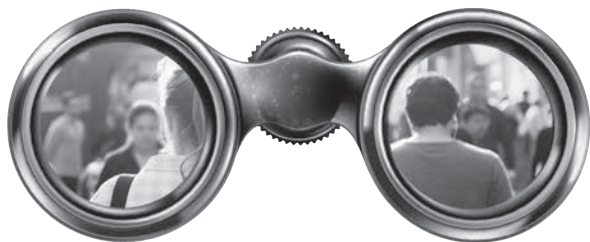
"Nancy Ortberg is not like Most-of-Us. At least she's not like the Most-of-Us that experts tell us we are supposed to be. Because she's not like Most-of-Us, she's got something to say to All-of-Us, and it is this: Most of us are not like Most-of-Us and it's okay not to be like Most-of-Us. Nancy's turned her wit and wisdom and rugged honesty into a new level of authenticity. Time passed me by as I read this book."

**SCOT MCKNIGHT, Ph.D.**, author of *The Jesus Creed*



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*Looking for God: Slightly Unorthodox, Highly Unconventional, and Entirely Unexpected Thoughts about Faith*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Everyone's story has a context, and mine is no exception. From time to time in this book you will read about a group called "Axis."

From 1998 to 2003, I was privileged to lead this ministry geared toward what we called "the eighteen to twentysomething generation" at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. Working on that leadership team with Steve, Heather, Daniel, Doug, Matt, and Jarrett was one of the most monumental eras in my life.



# INTRODUCTION

I think I have spent my whole life relearning who God is. Usually I get it wrong. How could I not, with God being so big and all? Perhaps this is why we need eternity: One life is not nearly enough. Eternity is about the amount of time it will take to plumb the depths of this God of ours.

I don't think I am unusual (well, yes I do, but not in regard to this). No matter how great our parents were, how deeply we think or feel, how much we hear and read, we just don't get it right.

How *could* we?

He's God and I'm not, so the plumbing and learning and discovering continue. It's been a great adventure, though. Much to my surprise, God is much gooder than I thought. Of course the red, squiggly line on my computer just underlined *gooder* as improper usage, but I'm sticking with it. I spent such a long time thinking God was grumpy, angry, distant, arbitrary, and withholding. But since He is God, I figured I'd better just grin and bear it. How delightful to discover how mistaken I was!

There is a movie from the 1970s called *Soylent Green*. It stars Charlton Heston and is sort of a futuristic, bleak movie about what life could be like after decades of overpopulation and pollution. People live stacked up next to each other in dilapidated high-rises, and

exist on a manufactured food called Soylent Green, since growing crops has long ago ceased. The dramatic surprise ending probably should have landed Heston an Oscar nomination, but it's another scene—before the ending—that has always captivated me.

In the movie, Edward G. Robinson plays Sol Roth, an old man who shares a tiny apartment with Heston's character, Robert Thorn. Sol Roth had been a man of letters, and his book collection is the only remnant of a kinder and gentler world.

In order to offset the dangerous and draining overcrowding of the world, the government offers an incentive for elderly people who volunteer to be euthanized. Before receiving the fatal injection, they will be placed on a gurney and taken to a room that contains a theater-in-the-round. In exchange for their lives, volunteers will be treated to a surround sound and vision experience of the world the way they remember it.

When Robert Thorn learns of Sol's intent to end his life, he races to the government facility where Sol is undergoing his final experience. Robert breaks into the room just as the screens are filled with magnificent scenes of a world set right. The only thing Robert has ever known is a gray world devoid of beauty. Now, with Sol watching in delight, he sees deer in a forest drinking from a stream and flowers exploding with color in a grassy meadow. He sees mountains covered in snow and the ocean crashing onto the shore, all set to the swelling strings of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. With tears falling down both men's cheeks, Robert Thorn shakes his head from side to side and whispers, "I had no idea. How could I have known?"

I love the wonder in his voice. I want to have that same reaction when I think of God. For many years, I thought things like longer quiet times would get me there. They did not.

I've fought hard to find this faith I've longed for, this God I've imagined. And I have found Him in the most unexpected places.

Surprises have clarified for me who God is, and I've found that challenging the prescriptive path has actually opened up the God of the Bible to me. As my understanding of God has grown, my faith has also grown—sometimes in ways that interfere with my life.

Annoying, yes, but also glorious.

This book is about the things that have sustained and propelled me toward God.

I had a lunch meeting recently with a man who goes to our church. He and his wife have just moved here from the United Kingdom and are launching an organization that connects churches with third world market products in order to help break the cycle of poverty. I asked him about his faith journey, and he talked about growing up in Christian circles and becoming increasingly disillusioned in his young adult years. Then, with great passion on his face, he described finding his way back, discovering this magnificently good God that he somehow had missed the first time around. He called it his “reconversion.”

I understood completely.



# 1

## THE PROBLEM WITH QUIET TIME

FOR MOST OF MY GROWING UP YEARS, I heard about the daily “quiet time.”

It was revered and talked about as the bedrock of the Christian faith. It was described as a serene and profound time in the morning (anything less than thirty minutes was quite unworthy) when one sat alone with God in meditation and study over a passage in Scripture. It also included a time of prayer (usually following an acronym like *ACTS*: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication . . . and we do not supplicate before we adore) and journaling.

After you had one—people always say they’ve “had” their quiet times—you talked about it. You might sneak it into a conversation in a way that was seemingly unpretentious, but always comparative. You’d talk about what a deep time you’d had that morning alone with God. How God had spoken to you. What a meaningful insight you’d received over a particular passage in the Bible. How long you had lingered over your journal that day.

And other people made sure to ask you about it in order to “hold you accountable.”

“How is your time with God going? What is He teaching you?”

Quiet time was always the barometer for your relationship with God, the ultimate measurement of your devotion and maturity. It was as if your whole relationship with God hinged on that morning experience.

So for many years, I practiced my quiet time. Not quite daily, but close—and whenever I missed a day, I was filled with great consternation and guilt. Every day, I expected something profound to occur during my quiet time, but most days, nothing approached profound. And when I engaged in conversation with others about our quiet times, my experience never quite lived up to theirs.

Then there came a point in my life when for a number of years, “quiet time” wasn’t an option. Now, you may disagree with that last sentence, but this is my book, and I am telling



you, during that period I could not have done a quiet time if I'd had a gun to my head.

My daughter Laura was three, Mallory was only eighteen months, and I was pregnant with Johnny. Never was there a more oxymoronic phrase than “quiet time.” In those days, I had to fight to go to the bathroom by myself, and when I did make it in there alone, one or both kids were always on the other side of the door, pounding and calling to me.

“Mommy, can we come in?”

“No.”

“Mommy, when are you coming out?”

“In a minute.”

“Mommy, is a minute up?”

I had never known before what it was like to wake up tired. Disrupted by teething and ear infections, my nights were staccato notes of sleep. When I woke up, the kids were either crying to be fed or unrolling toilet paper from the bathroom down the hall and wrapping the cat.

Days and weeks would go by without a moment for me to sit and open the Bible. And when those moments came, I either lost my train of thought or I fell asleep! But quiet time had been presented to me as the main/only means of connecting deeply to God, so I panicked. During this early stage of motherhood, I desperately needed God, but I was unable to connect with Him in the only way I thought counted.

I figured I could either meet with God again in about six

years (when all of the kids would be in school) or I would have to find other ways to connect to Him. And I did not know any other ways.

But God did.

I was standing in my kitchen trying to decide what to fix for dinner. Laura and Mallory were playing on the carpet but growing increasingly fussy after a long day. I was about twelve months pregnant, and exhausted.

I had an idea. We still had some time before dinner needed to be a reality, so I threw the girls in their car seats and headed off to the park, hoping they could work off some energy before I had to start dinner. (I also thought this could buy me more time to figure out *what* we would be having for dinner.)

I found a park bench I could sit on while the girls played, although I was so big I wasn't sure I would be able to jump up quickly if one of them needed something. I didn't really have a plan other than to let them play for about thirty minutes before heading home.

God's plan was to show me a window.

I watched as the girls dug in the sand and skipped around trying to catch the ducks. The sun was warm and low in the sky and provided me a sort of silhouetted view of my little redheaded daughters. I sat for a moment, relaxing into that scene, when all of a sudden I was so very deeply struck by how much I loved those kids. This wasn't just a recognition

that I loved them but a very unexpected, visceral response. While I had been mostly frustrated up to this point, as I sat on that bench watching them play and squeal with delight, I felt as if my heart would just burst with the amount of love it held for those two little girls. I found myself fighting back the tears, feeling a tightening in my throat and an overwhelming sense of this deep emotion for my children.

Almost in that same moment, when my defenses were down and I was flooded with intense emotion, God sent a tsunami that absolutely blindsided me. He whispered to me, *And that's just the tip of the iceberg as to how much I love you.*

Now I realize that most people would be really grateful to have an experience like this, and they'd probably respond really well. But for some reason, my heart just didn't seem to have enough room to accept this message God was trying to give me. My mind didn't have the capacity to understand it. In that one sentence, there seemed to be more goodness and grace than my body could contain.

And it was simply too much to take in, so I said aloud, "Stop!"

I am sure more than one person passing by wondered why this twelve-month-pregnant woman was talking to herself at the park. Tears welling up in my eyes, I scooped up the girls, put them into the car, and drove home. Now, not only did I still have no clue what to fix for dinner, I also did not know what to do with this whisper from God.

When he wrote to the Ephesian church, Paul said he prayed for them that they might have the power to understand just how wide, how long, how high, and how deep God's love is (Ephesians 3:18). I find it fascinating that he should pray not just that they would understand the vastness of God's love, but that God would give them the power necessary to grasp it.

In the days that followed, that moment on the park bench would not leave me, and I found myself thinking about it often. Over time, I began to understand that much of my heart was Teflon coated. It was protecting itself from getting hurt, but in the process it had also become impervious to what it really needed. God had used a moment when I was most open to overwhelm and break through that coating with what my heart needed. God knew that I needed a deep understanding of the kind of love He had for me. But it felt so foreign to me that when I experienced it, "Stop!" was my first reaction. How funny to yell stop at what you most need.

The walls of my limited understanding of love had trapped me. But God cut a little hole in my wall—a window—and gave me a glimpse into the kind of love that He offers. Then He told me that it was just that: a peek. Nowhere close to the fullness of His love. And even the glimpse, at least initially, was too much for me. Sometimes windows are like that. We move rapidly away from what we see in them, only to be drawn back to the view.

I knew that I was not fully ready to comprehend the extent to which God had revealed His love to me that day, but I also realized something else. It had been a very long time since I had felt that deeply connected to the presence of God. There had been weeks and months of quiet times when I never experienced God like that. I had read verses and journaled about those verses and even talked with other people about those verses, but I had never been *that* aware of God. The encounter I had with God on that park bench went beyond any experience I had ever had during a quiet time.

God began to teach me that there were so very many ways to deepen my relationship with Him. So very many ways in which to know and experience Him. And that the park bench *counted* as much as the quiet time did. That was revolutionary for me.

Slowly I began to understand that I had been seeing God from such a narrow perspective. I had boxed God up and compartmentalized Him into thirty minutes each morning. But in reality, He had been waiting for me to realize that He had invaded all the parts of my day, if I would just pay attention.

So I began to have “quiet times” all over the place.

Not long after this, my husband, John, and I went to see the stage production of *Les Misérables*. Toward the end of the play, as the hero, Jean Valjean, is near death, he sings to

his adopted daughter, Cosette, “to love another person is to see the face of God.”

As I watched the scene, tears began streaming down my face. I am not by nature a big crier, so John quickly asked me what was wrong. I said, “That is one of the truest and most beautiful phrases I have ever heard. That should have been a verse in the Bible. Why didn’t God make that a verse in the Bible?”

One night, a few weeks later, John got into bed and said, “I want to read you something.”

He opened his Bible to Genesis 33 and read to me the words of Jacob, reunited with Esau after having been estranged for a long time: “For to see your face is like seeing the face of God” (verse 10).

I was so glad to see that God had taken me up on my suggestion to make that a verse in the Bible.

And after that, often when I was in conversation with a good friend, I would think that part of the experience was like looking into the face of God: a quiet time.

Whenever I ate a good meal, preferably one I did not have to cook, I was struck by the gratuitous nature of the God who made the colors, flavors, and textures of avocado, red pepper, and tilapia. He only needed to make food nutritious and caloric. Everything we eat could simply taste like bread and milk, and functionally that would be good enough. There is really no need for the variety and taste

sensations that we experience when we eat, but God created them anyway. Steve Evans, a noted Christian philosopher, says that perhaps the best proof for the existence of God is banana cream pie. I think Steve is onto something.

So just as I found God in my friendships and in my children, I realized that a meal could also become a quiet time. Through my awareness of and gratitude for oatmeal with brown sugar, figs, and oranges, or mixed green lettuce and mushrooms, or horseradish sauce on a thinly sliced fillet, I deeply reflected on the good nature of God. I truly learned what it means to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8).

We get so prescriptive with the spiritual life. We pre-package what it means to have quiet time, and then we duplicate it, mass-produce it, insist upon it, and brag about it. We make it a formula: Thirty minutes. In the morning. Prayer that includes adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. And then, of course, we journal.

I remember where I was the day I realized that Jesus never journaled. I was driving, and when that thought flashed through my mind, I challenged it. *That can't be true.* When I realized it was true—*Jesus never journaled*—I pulled my car over to the side of the road and couldn't figure out whether to laugh or cry.

I don't think journaling is bad. I just think we have come to see it as a spiritual necessity, and it's not. My husband

is a pretty consistent journaler. It is very helpful to him in connecting with God. It is a practice that has helped shape his relationship and response to God. It is not so with me. I find journaling tedious. I am very self-conscious when I do it. I fall into the trap of doing it just to keep the dates consistent. I worry that when I die, someone will open those journals and notice the enormous gaps between the dates. John suggested that I pencil in “see other journals for missing entries,” but I figured if I had to lie about my spiritual practice it might be time to find a new one.

I also don't think having a quiet time is bad. Quite the contrary. Quiet times have helped me enrich my relationship with God and transform my character. But when it becomes prescriptive and confining and routine, a quiet time can be more of a barrier than a help.

There are so many correlations in Scripture between the spiritual life and the life of an athlete in training. As followers of Christ, we need to cross train. Athletes do this so that the whole body is developed, not just a focused part of it. When we give ourselves permission to vary our spiritual routines, we emerge with a broader, multifaceted view of our great God. What a joy to realize that from the time we wake up in the morning until the moment we lay our head on the pillow to sleep, we have been given a variety of extraordinary ways to connect with our extraordinary God.

Not long ago, we were driving on the highway that goes



into Yosemite through the Wawona Tunnel. When we emerged from the tunnel, we came to a spot on the left where we could pull over: Inspiration Point. Scores of cars were parked there, and people were getting out of their cars to take photographs.

We got out of the car, and suddenly I was overwhelmed by one of the most magnificent views I had ever seen. The valley below was truly awe-inspiring, with El Capitan's sheer granite wall on the left, and Half Dome and Bridal Veil Falls on the right. There was no sign telling people to whisper, but intuitively, they were. It seemed that we were all in awe as we witnessed what can happen with a wave of God's hand.

As I looked down into the valley, I was reminded that a very big God is taking care of the universe. And all of this goes on while I am occupied with my simple little life. The beauty that He has created is absolutely breathtaking, and it is only a glimpse at the beauty of His Spirit.

And for me, it is a quiet time.

And it *counts*.