

*MEETING*  
*GOD*  
*in*  
*QUIET*  
*PLACES*

F. LAGARD SMITH

*illustrated by*  
GLENDA RAE



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## MEETING GOD IN QUIET PLACES

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*Dedicated to my fellow villagers in Buckland and Laverton,  
and to the memory of those village “old-timers” who first  
welcomed me to my Cotswold cottage home.*



# *CONTENTS*

Foreword by Max Lucado .....	7
In Quiet Places .....	11
1. Rabbits .....	17
2. Balloons .....	23
3. Graffiti .....	29
4. Church Bells .....	39
5. The Old Church Wall .....	45
6. Snowfall .....	53
7. Jacob Sheep .....	59
8. Warplanes .....	65
9. Jumbo the Elephant .....	73
10. Seasons .....	81
11. Dream House .....	89
12. The Badger .....	97
13. Walking Stick .....	105
14. Lambing Time .....	111

15. The Rectory . . . . .	119
16. Gates . . . . .	127
17. The Sheep . . . . .	135
18. Darkness . . . . .	143
19. Holiday Cottages . . . . .	149
20. Exercise . . . . .	155
21. Sheep Droppings . . . . .	163
22. The Cemetery . . . . .	171
23. The Hunt . . . . .	179
24. Five Black Cows . . . . .	185
25. Gargoyles . . . . .	193
26. The Greenhouse . . . . .	201
27. Sunsets . . . . .	209
28. Cricket . . . . .	217
29. Signposts . . . . .	227
30. Nettles . . . . .	235
31. Gravestones . . . . .	243
Hymns and Works Used . . . . .	249

# FOREWORD

BY MAX LUCADO

Those of us who are accustomed to reading LaGard Smith know what to expect when we pick up a LaGard Smith book. We expect analytical dissection of difficult controversy. We expect clear-headed, even-balanced discussion of tough questions.

That's what you'd expect from a law professor. That's what you'd expect from a seasoned student of the court. That's what you'd expect from an ex-district attorney. Gentlemanly argumentation and clarification. That's what we've grown to expect from LaGard.

This book, however, is not what you'd expect. *Meeting God in Quiet Places* is a book for your heart. This work will introduce you to the other side of my friend LaGard. In these pages, you'll see the soul of a tender, generous servant whose one aim in life is to please his Father.

LaGard has invited us to walk with him through the countryside of England. But as you walk you will see much more than bunnies and sheep. You will see truths of Scripture come alive and the promise of God renewed with each sunrise.

If you are wanting LaGard to guide you into the courtroom debate of heated controversy, you've got the right author, for no one

can do it better. But you've got the wrong book. This work carries you not into controversy but into comfort—into the presence of God.

You'll be glad you made the journey.

—*Max Lucado*







THE JOURNEY BEGINS...

## IN QUIET PLACES

*“Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?”*

AMOS 3:3

Schedules. Commitments. So much to do, so little time. Have you ever wanted to escape the pressures of the fast lane? Have you ever thought how wonderful it would be if you could get away and spend time in solitude and contemplation—to truly stop and smell the roses? Are there times when you want to know more about yourself and your purpose for living?

If so, imagine walking through the English countryside, amid quiet villages, grazing sheep, and tranquil hills, where the ordinary cares of life gently give way to fresh perspectives and life-sustaining spiritual insights. Imagine a time of personal reflection in which you not only experience the harmony and beauty of nature, but also search out the heart and mind of nature’s Creator and come to know him in a deeper way.

For several months each summer, Ruth and I travel across

the pond to our cozy cottage in the Cotswolds, about two hours northwest of London. The Cotswolds—meaning “sheep hills”—are aptly named. Five hundred years ago great flocks of sheep roamed the Cotswold Hills. Nowadays there are fewer sheep, but they continue to provide a peaceful touch to the rolling landscape.

Between Shakespeare’s Stratford-Upon-Avon to the north and the university town of Oxford to the south, the Cotswolds are graced by several dozen charming villages. Even their names hint of pleasurable hours spent in antique stores and little tea shops serving scones and clotted cream: Bibury, Burford, Moreton-in-the-Marsh, Stow-on-the-Wold, Bourton-on-the-Water.

Our own village of Buckland, in Gloucestershire, just south of better-known Broadway, is a gentle scattering of two dozen honey-colored stone cottages along a single lane leading up into the hills. In the middle of the village is the thirteenth-century St. Michael’s church and a stonework manor house, which is now the charming Buckland Manor Hotel. There are no pubs or woolen shops in Buckland—just hardworking, friendly villagers who put out the welcome mat to all who pass by.

Time doesn’t exactly stand still here, but it comes close. Except for Sunday, I can forget what day of the week it is, and it doesn’t matter. And going to work is a pleasure. It’s as simple as commuting from upstairs to downstairs! Once I’m at my desk, I look out onto Ruth’s always-enchancing garden, fluttering birds on the bird feeder in the apple tree, horses and their riders along the equestrian path, and villagers walking their dogs up the village lane. Over the hedge and beyond the adjacent field, I have a magnificent view of the hills with their flocks of woolly creatures!

My daily walks on the paths around Buckland have become a never-ending source of strength and renewal. These are quiet

times—precious moments of reflection and introspection. These are times when I slow down to appreciate a world I, too, often ignore—whether the grandeur of a lingering sunset blazing on a distant horizon, or a delicate buttercup at my feet, begging to be picked.

In the pages to come, I invite you to walk with me along these paths and discover for yourself the wonders of the English countryside. Around the villages and in the hills, there is beauty for the eye and nourishment for the soul. Glenda Rae's marvelous pencil sketches capture with warmth, softness, and intimacy the many scenes that have become part of these daily moments with God.

But it's not just nature or village life that we will see on our walks. Every scene presents us with a parable that is rich in spiritual significance. Where nature graces the eye, the God of nature feeds the soul. All around us every day are signs pointing to God—limitless invitations to explore the mysteries of our existence, and precious gifts of love from the One who has made us.

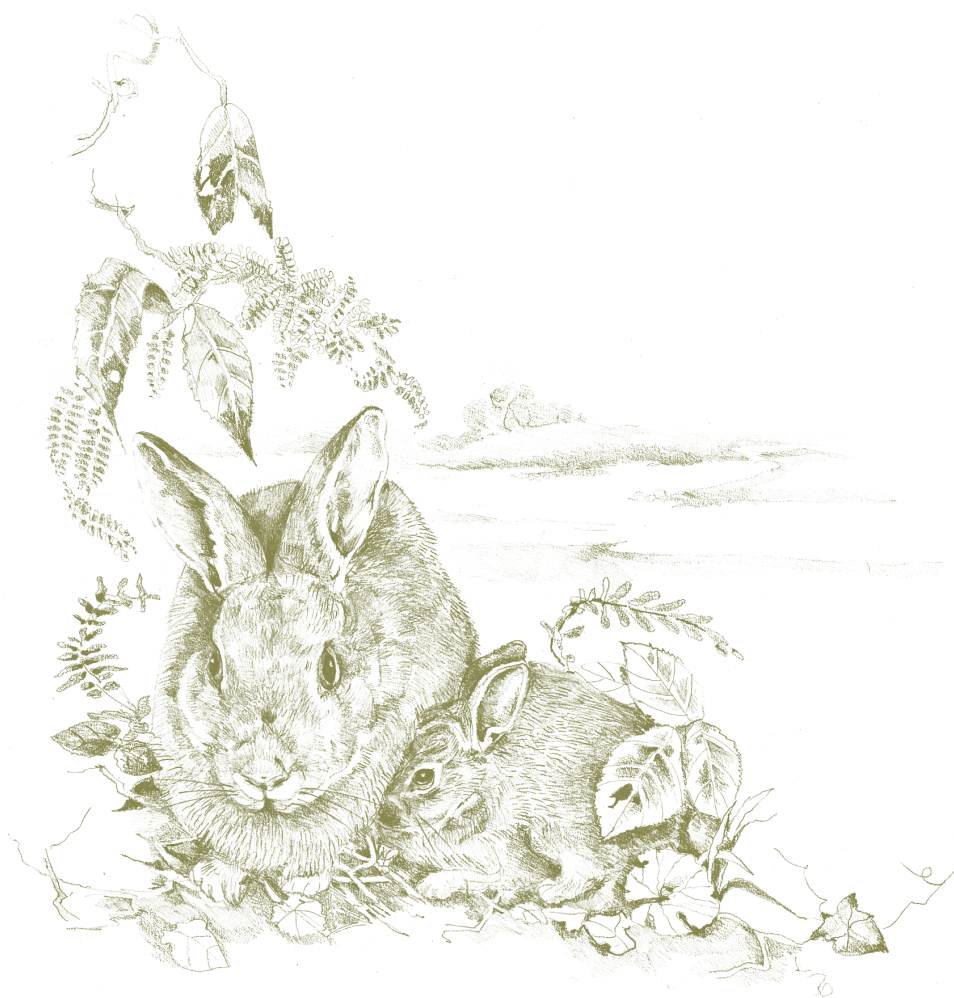
For me, walking in the hills provides the framework for a divine friendship. Though I often walk in solitude, I am never alone. God is my constant companion—guiding here, teaching there, but most of all sharing the wonders of life, as would a father walking hand in hand with his child.

The Scriptures tell us that Enoch “walked faithfully with God,” as also did Noah. It's the way of the righteous to walk each day with God. As the prophet Micah saw it, walking with God leads us to the very heart of our purpose for living: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to *walk humbly with your God.*” How could we not be humble, knowing that our Maker has invited us to share each day with him, whether we are literally taking a walk or perhaps unable to walk at all?

I appreciate that daily walks, whether literally taken along some path or whether thought of in a more spiritual vein, are easier for some people than for others. If you are like many people, you may have two or three children filling every minute of your busy day; or have to endure that bumper-to-bumper commute across the city every morning and afternoon; or have a job that leaves you so exhausted that taking a walk is the last thing you think of when you finally get home. Whatever your circumstances, you more than anyone know just how precious your quiet times can be. Hopefully these devotionals can compensate for some of the many demands which rob you of those special moments alone.

Of course, reading the pages of this book won't be quite the same as putting on your boots and heading up into the hills. That may have to wait until you can discover the Cotswolds for yourself. But it is my hope that you will enjoy at least some of the incomparable beauty of the English countryside, and—more importantly—experience new depths of love and new heights of faith in your own daily walk with God.







## CHAPTER ONE

# RABBITS

*“Those who live in accordance with the Spirit  
have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.”*

ROMANS 8:5

Quietly nibbling. Hopping gingerly here and there. Running flat-out across open terrain. The rabbits in the hills—scores of them everywhere you look—live up to their billing as being one of the most watchable species in the wild. They’re lovable and huggable—or would be, if you could ever get close enough to cuddle one of them in your arms.

Field rabbits aren’t a domesticated breed like tame pet store rabbits. In fact, the rabbits in the hills take off at the slightest hint of danger. Sometimes all you see are their white tails weaving and bobbing, as if dodging bullets.

What amazes me about the rabbits is that from 200 yards away, often before I have even noticed them, they are already running lickety-split to the safety of their burrows or to the nearest convenient hedgerow. How do they know I’m approaching? It’s those ears, right? (Are you old enough to remember set-top television

antennas that we used to call “rabbit ears?”) But what is it that rabbits actually hear? If you and I had ears of proportionate size to rabbits, would we hear what they hear, or only what we normally hear, except more loudly?

It’s not just the size of the ears. Dogs hear distant sounds long before we humans do, and the smallness or largeness of their ears doesn’t seem to matter. Surely, it’s pitch and frequency that make the difference. Animals are simply on a different wavelength. If we humans are listening to an “AM channel,” dogs and rabbits are listening to FM surround sound! Sometimes I envy the rabbits for their sense of hearing. To be able to tune in to another frequency on the dial of nature would be mind-boggling. Just imagine the sounds we might hear!

But there is already a sense in which I *can* tune in to another frequency. Jesus hinted as much when he repeatedly said to his audiences, “Whoever has ears, let him hear.” *Everybody* has ears. Why would Jesus suggest that we need ears to hear unless he was suggesting that hearing is a matter of tuning in to the *right* frequency—having the *right* ears!

It’s one thing to *hear*, and another altogether to *listen*. A husband may hear his wife asking him a question, but is he really *listening*? Is he attentive, concerned, or interested? Sometimes we get so focused on whatever we’re thinking about that we don’t even notice when someone is speaking directly to us. Our ears are open, but our minds are closed.

Surely that explains why Jesus often taught in parables, those simple stories with spiritual applications which almost anyone can understand—if *one cares to*. Those who don’t care invariably miss the point! It’s not their ears or their ability to hear that are

defective—only their willingness to *listen* to what they hear. Jesus taught in simple parables to test people's *hearts*, not their *ears*.

Perhaps that explains how two people can look at the same universe around them, with one seeing the wonders of an intelligently designed creation and the other seeing nothing but interesting by-products of blind chance. After all, nature itself is the ultimate parable, from which all other parables are taken. Therefore, a person whose heart is already turned toward God will easily see God in nature. A person whose heart adamantly rejects God will never find God either in what he sees or in what he hears.

Ironically, the very people whom Jesus accused of not hearing his message were some of the most religious people of his day. In fact, they were often the community's religious leaders. Is it possible that I myself might be "hearing" God while going through the motions of some familiar worship ritual, but not really listening to what he wants me *to be*? Do I know all the right words but nothing of their true meaning? Is my hearing God more form than substance?

It's true that God has things for us to do by way of worship, but isn't one of the reasons we spend time in his presence simply to deepen our love relationship with him on a personal level? What we *do* for him is meant to nurture who we *are* in him. So how do we move from merely *doing* to actually *being*?

Imagine, for a moment, that you are sitting alone in a room, quietly reading a book. There are no sounds in the room except the occasional turning of a page, or perhaps a clock ticking away in the background. Do you hear the orchestra playing? It's playing right in your room. Do you hear someone telling about today's news events? It's happening right in your room. All of this and

more is happening in the quietness of your room, if only you want to listen to it. All you have to do is flip a switch. If you have a radio, or television, those electronic sound waves are in the room with you right now!

In much the same way, there is also a spiritual dimension which surrounds and permeates our material world. Think of it as the realm in which angels exist—and Satan. It is in this unseen world that the Holy Spirit moves and in which spiritual warfare is taking place. The spiritual dimension is the arena of prayers and miracles. It's the world of the supernatural, the transcendent—a trysting place between the human and the divine.

Unfortunately, getting in touch with the spiritual dimension is not always as easy as flipping a switch. In fact, sometimes tuning in to it can be difficult. Our own spirits are meant to be the receivers that put us on the right wavelength with God, but often our hearts and minds are full of static!

The most serious barrier to our quest for true spirituality is a constant jamming of the frequencies. Just as radio and television transmissions can be jammed in such a way that no one can tune in to them, our desire to hear God can also be drowned out by interference.

How can we listen to God when we can't even hear ourselves think? Both the incessant noise and the daily distractions of a high-intensity society tend to jam any hope we might have of hearing that "still, small voice" of God. In order to tune in to God, we may have to tune out the television and anything else that diverts our attention.

Rabbits have also taught me something else: the critical importance of using my ability to hear. For rabbits, hearing is an early warning system. Their lives literally depend upon their hearing the

approach of danger. How then should I expect to know when I am in spiritual danger unless I have my heart tuned to a God who warns me, through his written revelation, of the many threats to my spiritual well-being? Being spiritually hard of hearing could one day prove to be disastrous.

I love watching the rabbits on the hill. But I think they must be there for more than my amusement. If the rabbits can teach me anything, maybe it's that I need to make sure I'm on the right wavelength: *God's* wavelength. As one who has been given ears to hear and a heart to understand, I need to tune in more and more each day to the spiritual dimension around me, and then listen like I've never listened before!



## CHAPTER TWO

# BALLOONS

*“Trust in the LORD with all your heart.”*

PROVERBS 3:5

There they are—toys for grown-ups! Always somewhat fanciful, a bit like cotton candy. Sometimes I look off to the distant vale and discover a parade of three, five, or perhaps as many as ten brightly colored hot air balloons drifting like pollen on the breeze in my direction. In this already-magnificent Cotswold setting, it is a glorious, exciting sight!

Floating in from the north just as the sun is setting, the balloons often land in the vale to the south, too far away for me to see them touch down. But when the winds blow the balloons from south to north, they pass right over the village.

Because the village lies at the foot of the hill, there is always a frantic attempt by any low fliers to gain altitude so as to make it over the steep escarpment to the next valley and beyond. The quietness of distant balloons can be deceiving. When more hot air is needed for a quick ascent, thunderously loud blasts belch out of the balloon, like a fire-breathing monster on the loose.

It sounds and looks terribly frightening at such times, but the people inside the basket always seem to be of good cheer. Sometimes they are so close that we exchange pleasantries. At other times they are sweeping by so rapidly that I find myself running up the village lane like a schoolboy just to keep up. Of course, my windedness as I rush up the steep hill at the far end of the village reminds me that I am not the energetic schoolboy I once was.

Yet the excitement spurs me on—past other villagers who have dashed out into their gardens to enjoy the sight; past the church with its squarish Norman steeple threatening to pierce the billowing nylon; and on to the top of the hill, where I catch my breath, take one last longing look, and then reluctantly bid farewell to these adventurers in their multicolored, lighter-than-air ice-cream cones.

How I envy them! What it must be like up there, looking down on the patchwork quilt of green crops and bright yellow summer rapeseed fields, stitched together by threads of neatly trimmed hedgerows and seemingly endless drystone walls crisscrossing the countryside.

Sometimes I see them racing across the sky as if trying to catch the sunset. At other times I see them hovering motionless, like droplets of water on the underside of a spout that never seem to fall. Sometimes hurried, sometimes helpless, balloons are never alone up there—never totally free. They are always at the mercy of some invisible force.

That's why I have mixed feelings about going up in a balloon. You can never be totally in control. With my feet planted firmly on the ground, at least I *feel* like I'm in control. But up there, who knows? Up there I would be totally dependent upon the pilot, and he in turn is dependent upon winds and currents over which he



has no control. And, of course, there are those church steeples to think about!

I suppose it's all about trusting the unseen—relying on forces we can't understand or control. Trusting other people is difficult enough, but trusting an invisible power is sometimes even more difficult.

When Thomas the doubter was finally convinced by the nail prints in Jesus' hands that Jesus had in fact risen bodily from the grave, Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). Faith in the unseen is what faith is all about.

From my youth I have happily placed my trust in an unseen God. Even now, in most cases, I truly am a willing passenger. And so far the flight has been, if not always smooth, at least accompanied by an abiding sense of security. Over the years, I have been through storm and calm, through ups and downs; through the heartache of broken relationships, the passing of loved ones, the tears of defeat, the fear of loneliness, and the discouragement of my own fallibility. But somehow I keep flying. Somehow he lifts me higher. In the safety of his gracious providence he carries me over the rough times and shares with me the joys of a life lived by faith.

I confess that there are times when I find faith in God to be as confining as the basket hanging beneath the balloon. Sometimes I can't understand why I always have to be in *his* basket, or why I always have to do everything *his* way. Yet every time I truly turn my life over to God, I invariably forget the basket and find myself concentrating on the beauty. When I let God's invisible power take control, I am dependent, but oddly free. I am no longer in control, yet I am safe and secure in his leading.

The apostle Paul put it in terms of *freedom* versus *slavery*—the irony being that “slavery to God” provides greater freedom than what the world would think of as “freedom”! Writing to believers in the city of Rome, Paul said, “Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life... Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 6:22; 8:1-2).

Jesus himself talked about the kind of freedom that is *really* free. “If the Son sets you free, you will be *free indeed*,” Jesus says in John 8:36. What makes us really free? In the words of Jesus “*the truth* will set you free” (John 8:32). The truth that we are never in control even when we think we are. The truth that a life without God is the most fearful life anyone can live. The truth that the most fulfilled people in the world are those who have “let go and let God.”

But “letting go” isn’t always easy. So many things hold us back from flights of faith. For many of us, it’s pride—perhaps the pride of having to admit that we’ve been wrong about God in the past. Possibly it’s the fear of being disappointed if we really surrender ourselves to God’s control. Or it’s a relationship that might have to be sacrificed. Or it’s giving up the anger we harbor against God for something we’ve experienced that seems unjust. What is it that prevents *you* from climbing into the basket and taking off with God?

As I look around me, I sometimes think I see what balloonists must see all the time: other people looking on with envy, yet not quite sure they are ready to climb inside the basket. We all want the kind of faith that buoys up true believers, gives them assurance beyond themselves, and keeps them going even in hard times.

Usually, however, we are content to merely exchange pleasantries with God. If only *he* will get close enough to *us*, we think!

Sometimes we move beyond mere pleasantries. Sometimes the thought of actually being “up there” with God is sufficiently exciting to lead us on a wild chase in search of him through one religious avenue or another—as if somehow, through that distant chasing, we are truly involved in the experience.

But nothing can surpass the reality that settles in on us when we reach the point with God where we know beyond a shadow of doubt that he is in control. When we *really know* that we have nothing to fear! When we take that confident step and *actually get into the basket!* It is then, when we have let go of everything that holds us back, that we will know true freedom. And beauty. And breathtaking heights of exhilarating joy!

I can now vouch for this personally. Since first writing this chapter, I’ve taken a leap of faith into the basket and discovered that freedom, beauty, and joy. Not just a flight in a balloon, but a flight of faith over the landscape of a lifetime!