

I CAN ONLY
IMAGINE 2
The Story That Inspired
the Motion Picture

EVEN IF

Trusting God Through the Fire



BART MILLARD (of MercyMe) & SHANNON MILLARD
with ROBERT NOLAND

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DAVID  COOK®

transforming lives together

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A PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM BART AND SHANNON

In March of 2017, MercyMe released our ninth studio album, *Lifer*. The first single to radio was “Even If.” Right out of the gate, the song was a huge success and charted faster than anything we’d ever released, including “I Can Only Imagine.” “Imagine” was a marathon in gaining popularity, but “Even If” was a sprint. A year later, in March of 2018, *I Can Only Imagine*, the movie, as well as the book, was released. Now, here we are, eight years later—same band, same Bart, new song, new story.

When Shannon and I first told our kids we were involved in a serious discussion with the filmmakers about a *second* movie, right away, they all asked the same question, “What?! What’s the sequel?” After I answered, “The story behind ‘Even If,’” our daughter Sophie, who was sixteen at the time, came back with a thought I loved as soon as I heard it and have

repeated many times to others since then: “Well, I guess for a songwriter, the sequel is just the next song.” Sophie’s response connected the dots to help me see how both songs, “I Can Only Imagine” and “Even If,” along with the real-life stories that led me to write them, were connected in ways I hadn’t completely realized myself.

In the 2026 movie *I Can Only Imagine 2*, as well as in these pages, we dive into the details of our lives that began right after the song “Imagine” took off and was heard around the world. As I talked about in the first book, the movie had to portray my story leading up to the song in a run-time of an hour and fifty minutes. With the release of the second film, once again I’m grateful to be given the space to dive deeper in this book and offer much more than the filmmakers are able to do. Producing a movie, every scene costs a great deal of money. Literally, every *second* counts to try to tell the story. Here, while we want every *word* to count, we have the freedom to not only expand but also to explain the details.

The first story was mostly about me and my dad, while this second story focuses on me and my son, our oldest, Sam. In the first book, there were excerpts from my wife, Shannon, but most of the pages dealt with my life leading up to our marriage and the success of “Imagine.” In the 2026 film and this book, as in life, she is right beside me from beginning to end, so her voice as my wife and the mother of our five kids is absolutely crucial to the narrative. (Shannon’s words are uniquely marked throughout the book, as are Sam’s.)

After walking through the many storms of life you are about to hear of, experiencing a devastating domino effect of tragedies, eventually, Shannon and I made the commitment to spend many, many hours in counseling to invest in our lives and future, individually and together as a couple. Because of the amazing healing to which we credit God for leading us to experience, we have no need to walk back through all our painful and vulnerable

moments. So our decision to open up and invite you into the living room of our lives is actually not about us or for us. This book is for you. After surviving all the trauma, we believe a part of our purpose on the other side is to share our story to help others find hope in the helplessness and grace in the grief. If you haven't experienced an "Even If" moment in your faith, you will, because, in this life, it's not *if*, but *when*.

Like David, the shepherd turned king who became famous for his conquests on the battlefield for Israel but then came to the end of himself through a series of bad decisions, or Peter, who Jesus called "the rock," yet denied the Lord three times at His worst moments, we follow those who have gone before us in the faith by offering a brutally honest testimony. Our hearts' desire is to present personal evidence of God's goodness amid our humanity, in the middle of our mess.

We invite you to come alongside and walk with us through our story after "Imagine" impacted our lives, as it did so many others. Our hope and prayer is that you are challenged by our confessions in the struggle, that you look inward and be honest about your own questions and doubts, and that you have the opportunity to discover the same truth that, in the end, we did.

For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.

(Psalm 100:5)

Introduction

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE BROKEN

When the *I Can Only Imagine* movie and book came out, I assumed that would be all the story that could possibly be told about my life. From my mom leaving my brother and me with an abusive father, Dad's cancer diagnosis and late-in-life radical transformation in Christ, and dealing with his death, to the beginning of MercyMe and then writing our signature song about Heaven—all those events were overwhelming for me to process and release to the world. But I'm grateful for how God has used my song and my story to reach a global audience and change so many lives, which continues to this day.

By the time the credits rolled in the first movie, the Hollywood “happy ending” was achieved and we appeared to have landed in the middle of the pot of gold at the rainbow's end. By 2003, the band's success began to

bring industry awards; connections with pro athletes, mainstream artists, and celebrities; sold-out arena shows; and, of course, millions of records sold. Yet, little did we know a very different story was about to be written. When everyone assumed the Millard family's lives had become nothing but blessing, a succession of tragedies came our way. Compounded by the hidden, unresolved trauma of my past, I was brought to a place of brokenness that lasted for years, leaving me to question if or how life would ever be the same again.

I Can Only Imagine 2, the story behind the song “Even If,” is all about what began to happen when the first story ended—the year Shannon and I use to mark the timeline of our lives. Creating our own personal BC and AD, we literally divide life into pre-2004 and post-2004 because our journey took a turn we never saw coming. We were blindsided when everything, and I mean *everything*, changed. The first movie and book covered the first half of my life, from childhood to twenty-seven years old. This story covers the second half, from twenty-eight to fifty-two years old, the time of this writing.

Over the years, Shannon and I have seen throughout God's Word that He is up-front and honest with us about this life. Yet in our desperate desire for self-preservation at all costs, we tend to only want to accept the good and the blessed from Him, never the bad and the broken. In Psalm 23, everyone loves the promise of “green pastures” and “quiet waters,” but there's no guarantee we won't experience walking “through the valley of the shadow of death” (vv. 2, 4 NASB). When Jesus told us in Matthew 5:45 that “[God] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous,” that wasn't just a warning but a promise. So many believe that when good comes, God is good, but when bad happens, then He must be bad. Or mad. Or we're being punished. But the purpose of faith is to go beyond cause-and-effect and lead us toward

trust-and-obey. While most of us go kicking and screaming, we eventually have to make the decision to accept the “rain,” “the evil and the good.”

In John 16:33, Jesus gave us another promise, “In this world you will have trouble.” We can certainly tell you from experience that His words should not be taken lightly. No one should think they have arrived at a place to be the exception to the rule. Yet I’m so grateful Jesus didn’t leave us there, when He added, “But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Let’s just say, after experiencing the “world of trouble,” it took quite a while for me to start to discover the “take heart” and “overcome” part.

One thing the past twenty-two years—life after 2004—has shown me: If we are actually going to follow Jesus, then we have to own up to and deal with our doubts as well as our faith, allow for the questions as well as the answers we just thought we knew, and accept the trials along with the triumphs. Which brings me to Job 13:15, a Bible verse you’re never going to see on a coffee mug or bumper sticker because we’d prefer to ignore or deny the implication. Yet ten different translations and paraphrases use “even if” to deliver Job’s very tough challenge to us in the midst of suffering:

Even if God kills me, I’ll still put my hope in him. (NIRV)

One truth Shannon and I have come to better understand over the years is that when we truly follow Jesus through the dark valleys—through the rain, trouble, and death we experience in this life—in His time, He will lead us to discover how good He is when we are broken.

Chapter 1

THE WHISPERS OF “WHY?” AND “WHAT IF?”

In the thirty-plus-year history of MercyMe, everything changed for us in January of 2002 when “I Can Only Imagine” hit number one on the Christian music charts. As the little ol’ worship band from Greenville, Texas, we literally took everyone by surprise, coming out of nowhere in the thriving Contemporary Christian music scene that had experienced a massive amount of acceptance and growth throughout the ’90s. Then the real game-changer tipping point came in 2003 when a Dallas mainstream deejay took an on-air dare and played the song as a joke to his listeners. But as the old saying goes, “God had other plans.”

The station’s phone lines lit up with requests to play “Imagine” again with everyone asking, “Who sings that song?” While there was no such thing yet as “going viral,” that’s exactly what happened among mainstream

adult contemporary radio stations across the US. What a crazy, unpredictable moment when a ballad about Heaven that unapologetically uses the name of Jesus in the lyrics somehow, someway, took off like a rocket, ironically, on a rock station!



The only way this crazy story was able to play out was because God Almighty obviously decided He was going to make it happen.



Our “five minutes of fame” started to get traction, and life for MercyMe began to move us out of our comfort zone. Our previously scheduled shows at Christian events started to mix with requests from promoters and showrunners that are typically reserved only for Top 40 mainstream artists. For example, we would lead worship at a Christian student conference and then be the headliner at a national finals rodeo. We would play at an evangelistic crusade and then be the musical guests on late-night TV like *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. The sudden success and demand was absolutely insane.

By 2018, our 2001 album *Almost There*, with the original version of “Imagine,” was certified triple platinum, and in 2022 the song itself was certified five-times platinum. Here’s some perspective—a record label could spend millions of dollars in promotion and marketing for an artist’s single and *never* experience a win like that. In fact, those kinds of losses and misses happen all the time in the music business. A massive hit is a rare exception, especially across so many genres of music. So the only way this crazy story was able to play out was because God Almighty

obviously decided He was going to make it happen. There is no other explanation.

Everything was going so well. Exactly the “abundant life” that “good Christians” expect for God to deliver. Then, just as 2004 got started, all hell broke loose. And I don’t use that phrase lightly or for shock value. Back in 2018, I knew the story of me and my dad was going to be hard to tell. Now, here I am again and, I’ll be honest, this one is definitely harder.



Having just celebrated New Year’s 2004, I had a rare weekend at home. Typically, following the holidays, there are a few weeks before the music business starts firing on all cylinders and touring begins. On Friday night, January 2, our firstborn, Sam, had been in bed for hours, and then, after I went to bed, Shannon was going to stay up and take care of some of her to-do list in the quiet. Unbeknownst to us, at some point late that evening, Shannon’s brother, Chris, had gotten his heart broken. At twenty years old, he was entrenched in the classic battle of becoming an adult and dealing with everyone’s expectations of what he was supposed to be doing with his life. At around 1:00 a.m., now the third of the month, he showed up at our house to talk to his big sister.

Chris was a great kid with a solid reputation in town and at his workplace, a very humble job at the Greenville High School cafeteria. But he never saw it as beneath him or thought that he was too good for the work. All the “lunch ladies” there absolutely adored him. He loved on everyone he worked with and served them all. Being a Texas boy, he also owned two horses that he rode and cared for. So Chris was a bit of an anomaly being a cowboy who worked in food service.

Shannon was eight years older than Chris. As a kid, she had prayed for years for a baby brother. So when God answered her countless prayers, she thought he was the best gift ever. With the age difference, Shannon was the ultimate big sister but also like a second mom. Chris was dyslexic, which always makes life so much harder for those who suffer from the learning disorder. If Chris needed help with his homework, Shannon was his go-to. If he got angry at their parents, he went to his big sister. If he blew it with a bad choice, he confessed to Shannon. If he had a flat tire, he called her for help. She may not have always had the answers or been able to handle everything, but that was the kind of relationship they had. Shannon was Chris's on-call rescuer. Because of their close family dynamic, plus me being on the road so much, I didn't get involved or try to intervene when there was an issue. Because of their big sister-little brother connection, they always managed to work things out just fine without me.

After dealing with the details of his heartbreak, Chris and Shannon began to go round and round, talking through his struggles with all the big-picture issues of life. He was begging her for evidence that God is real. She did her very best to offer him answers, saying things like, "Faith is an intangible. You have to decide to trust and believe God. Learn to read His Word and walk in His ways." But Chris had grown up in the same strong Christian home as his big sister, so he already knew all the ready-made answers. He pleaded with Shannon, "Help me figure this out. Show me it's real. Tell me it's worth it." Chris was longing for an experience, like most of us do, which, of course, no one can make happen for someone else. With all those burdens and questions on top of his fresh heartbreak, for the first time possibly ever, Shannon was running out of answers for her brother.

Shannon

Around 1:30 a.m., I realized I needed help, told Chris to wait, and walked down the hall to our bedroom to wake Bart. After rousing him from sleep, I said, “Hey, I need you. I’ve never dealt with something like this with Chris. I’m desperate for your help.” Trying to wake up and process what I was asking, understandably, Bart was hesitant at first. Over the years, I had asked for his assistance with everyday, normal things with my brother that were beyond my ability, but never something this heightened or this heavy.

While waiting for Bart to answer, I suddenly realized Chris had come down the hall and was standing at the bedroom door. In his upset state of mind, he interpreted Bart’s delayed response as not caring, which, of course, wasn’t true. As I turned around, Chris said, “He’s not going to come, is he?” Hearing my brother’s question, I looked back at Bart with a now-there’s-no-choice expression on my face. With that, Bart got up, and we all went back to the living room for round two.

Now, as both of us were engaged with Chris in this emotionally driven back-and-forth, he would be a bit aggressive and disrespectful to Shannon one minute and then get convicted and start crying the next. While we knew he was a Christian, we could see Chris was struggling with what so many young people do at that age: being ready to own your own faith but trying to figure out how and what that looks like, to no longer just blindly follow the God of your parents and family but find your own belief. That’s a tough battle for anyone to resolve. The proof of

his struggle came when, at one point, Chris confessed, “Man, I just want to get right with Jesus.”

The conversation went on for hours as Shannon and I listened patiently, trying everything and saying anything we could think of to help him. That was definitely one of those times when you’re silently praying for wisdom to know what to do but starting to doubt if you’re making any headway at all. You start to feel like you’re caught in a vicious cycle. Somewhere around 3:00 a.m., my physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion got the best of me. I finally reached the point Shannon did earlier when she had come to get me. I ran out of options just like she had. Now, we’d both hit the wall. In frustration, I stated, “Chris, somebody just needs to take you out back and knock some sense into you!”

Of course, I didn’t mean that literally. Shannon had been responding to him as his big sister, and I was acting like his big brother, which was exactly my relationship with Chris. Exhausted and frustrated himself, he shot back at me, “Oh, okay! Are you going to be the one to do it?!” Seeing and hearing his response, I softened immediately and reassured him, “No, no, I’m just messing with you, Chris. You really need to get some sleep. It’s been a long night. You’ll have a better perspective tomorrow.”

Unlike what he’d done many times before, Chris ignored my advice to stay and go to sleep and, instead, quietly got up off the couch and headed for the front door. Just as he opened it, he stopped and, looking back at both of us, somberly said, “Tell Sam I love him.”

By now, it was somewhere between 3:00 and 4:00 a.m. on January 3. As the door closed and we saw the lights of Chris’s truck shine through the window, we both thought something about his goodbye didn’t feel right. Only a few minutes had passed when Shannon said, “Bart, that was weird. You need to go find him and bring him back here.”

Shannon

Within seconds of my brother making that statement and heading out the door, I felt a sudden sense of urgency. Whether he consciously realized it or not, my brother sounded like he was saying goodbye. There was a strange finality to his words. Chris was not one to leave things undone, and this was certainly not resolved. The state I was in was very much unlike me. I froze. I could not move. I didn't jump off the couch and run after him. Confused by my own hesitation, I thought, *What's wrong with me? Get up! Go!*

The internal battle in my heart was that I had just invited my husband into a difficult situation with my brother for the first time, and it had gone badly. Bart had stood up for me, so I felt the tension of honoring my husband and letting go versus getting up and going after my brother. My compromise was to ask Bart to get in the car and find Chris.

Knowing it was best for Shannon to stay with Sam, I grabbed my shoes and keys and headed out. By that point, I didn't know where Chris was going, and depending on how fast he was driving, I knew he had a decent head start on me. I went anywhere I thought he might have gone. Initially, we had made the assumption he might have been drinking before he got to our house, which turned out not to be the case, but I knew if he had, he would never have gone back to his parents' house. Most likely, he would have driven to a friend's.

Hours later, as the sun came up over the horizon, I had struck out. No Chris. Anywhere. Especially back then, Greenville was not that big. With

nowhere else to look, I got back home around 7:30 a.m. Absolutely drained from being up all night and the emotional toll, I went to bed.

A short time later, Shannon's dad called her. Someone had driven up on a one-car accident and called 911. After being awake all night and emotionally exhausted, Chris must have fallen asleep at the wheel, run off the road, and, at the point of impact, been thrown from the truck. The final detail that made his tragic death even harder was that the road he was on was one of the routes back to our house. The only one I hadn't driven. Because Shannon was Chris's hero, if he had any sort of disagreement with her or felt bad about how he left, his pattern was always to come back, apologize face to face, and resolve any issue. He was clearly returning to set things right with us.

Obviously, a moment we would have given anything to have experienced.

The sudden, unexpected news from her dad absolutely devastated Shannon.

Shannon

The rest of Saturday, which spilled over into Sunday, was spent meeting with police and authorities to answer questions in between sobbing and feeling such deep, unspeakable grief. Of course, all our extended family and huge circle of friends were coming by, so those days were a blur. To pour salt in the wound, Sunday, January 4, was Sam's second birthday and a big family celebration had been planned for that evening. But instead of getting ready for a birthday party for our son, we were at the funeral home making final arrangements for my brother. Because Sam was still just a toddler, he didn't know any different. But

with him being my first child, I got very angry with God and the horrible questions of “Why?” began. I kept asking, “Why did You allow this to happen to Chris?! Why did You let this happen right before our son’s birthday?! Why would You allow what should be such a fun, sweet day to be turned into a horrible tragedy?!”

Talking with one of my closest friends, she said, “Shannon, I know Chris dying right before Sam’s birthday feels horribly unfair right now, but in time, this will actually turn out to be a blessing. Every year, celebrating Sam’s life is going to lift you up out of the memories of grief and sadness. There will always be joy on the other side of that day.”

In the moment, all I could feel was anger at her for saying that to me. I wasn’t in any shape to process a sentiment like that. I thought, *Never! That is never going to happen.* But just as she said, down the road, I realized my friend was right. What appeared to be cruel at the time would prove to be redeeming in the years to come.

Along with the shock of being woken up to hear what happened to Chris, an internal accusation showed up right away that punched me in the gut so hard that I felt like all the breath had been knocked out of me. Because of my past, I was wired to feel that I was responsible for *anything* bad that happened around me. Even in situations that were totally out of my control, my mind would find a way to justify how I had somehow caused the crisis or that the problem was me. A condemning voice would whisper in my ear, “Well, you screwed up again, didn’t you, Millard?” My response was to quickly agree that somehow I had, always guilty as charged.

That's when I began to replay the last words I said to my brother-in-law: "Somebody ought to take you out back and knock some sense into you." And then his angry response started screaming in my head, "Oh, are you going to be the one to do it?!" With that scene playing on repeat in my mind, I took it a step further: *That's why he left our house and went driving around.* Like a defendant standing before the judge of my own conscience, I dropped the gavel and declared, "I must be responsible for Chris's death! It's just a matter of time before the authorities piece all this together and come for me! Do I need to go ahead and turn myself in?"

While this is so hard to admit and I know it can sound really paranoid, for any of us, the state of shock and grief at the news of a loved one's sudden, tragic death does strange things to our minds and hearts. Irrational? Yes. Unfounded? Sure. But understandable? Certainly. Because God originally made His creation for the Garden, He never intended for us to have to deal with this sort of trauma. All the toxic feelings we can experience amid crises only proves that truth.

Regardless of anyone's reassurance, I couldn't shake the unbearable weight of guilt and the overwhelming sense of shame. I grabbed hold of this new accusation and made room for it among all the emotional baggage from my childhood and teen years. Before, I always found a way to stuff it down and press on like I was fine. But what made this time different was death. While I had struggled with my dad's passing, I never felt responsible for his cancer. But a twenty-year-old who was like a little brother to me when my voice was possibly the last one he heard? To me, this was very different.

Shannon said she was battling the "whys," while my constant "what ifs" began attacking and torturing my thoughts.

And the one person I couldn't run away from was me.

Shannon

I became a Christian at six years old. I’ve never known life apart from Jesus. In fact, I struggled a bit in high school when I began to hear other people’s testimonies of “I was in the pit, hit bottom, and then I found Christ.” I remember thinking, *Oh, I’ve always known Jesus. Maybe that’s a bad thing?* This question led to doubts, such as, *I don’t have a story like that, so do I really know Him?* I wrestled for a couple of years with wishing I had that kind of tale to tell, which is crazy when I look back. Of course, I eventually reached a point of realizing I hadn’t missed anything, except maybe a lot of heartache. In time, I became very grateful for my story.

Our life in Greenville, Texas, was surrounded by parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. As Bart’s career began to take off, I was so thankful that I could see God’s obvious fingerprints in the timing of His blessing from MercyMe’s success and our own family growing with Sam’s birth. Often, I thought, *How could life possibly get any better? Everything is exactly the way it’s supposed to be.* I had my family and Bart’s family, a good church and great friends. We all loved Jesus. We were doing Bible studies together and taking our kids to Mothers of Preschoolers. My life was what I had always hoped and dreamed it would be. Even still, I was a little nervous about Bart getting so busy because of the band’s popularity, asking obvious internal questions like, *How are we going to balance all this? What’s ahead? What is our life going to look like?*

The day Chris died, my little utopia was shattered. My previously untested faith was shaken. On January 3, 2004, I stood face to face with the kind of trial I never anticipated would come.

Chris and I were raised in a strong Christian home, and our family was in church every time the doors were open with my parents constantly serving in ministry. While we never questioned their love for us and they were always our biggest cheerleaders, the generational dynamic was present in them not showing very much physical affection. In short, no one in our family was a hugger.

That early morning, when Chris first walked in the door of our home, before all the questions and deep discussion began, he collapsed on our couch, sobbing. I was surprised by the fact that I had never seen him show that level of emotion. Letting go and crying that hard was very unusual for him. As I watched and wondered what to do next, as clear as I have ever sensed the Lord's voice speaking to me, in my spirit, I heard, "Hold him tight." Because offering that sort of physical gesture was not at all the norm for us, immediately, the battle in my head started as I questioned, *Really, God? Should I do that? Isn't that going to be weird?*

Taking a deep breath with an okay-here-goes attitude, I got up, went over to the couch, sat down as close as I could to Chris, and wrapped my arms around him. Obeying the words I heard, I "held him tight." His response? My little brother melted into my arms, laid his head down in my lap, and sobbed so hard that my pajamas were soon soaked with his tears.

Today, thinking about how I went against my natural instinct and our family dynamic, I'm so grateful, so thankful, because that moment and memory is now one of the greatest treasures of my life. I had the privilege of being the last person on this earth to hold my brother before, just a couple hours later, he would be held tight in the arms of Jesus.

For our Chris ...

No more heartache.

No more questions.

No more tears.

No more pain.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever. (Revelation 21:4 NLT)

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THE STORYLINE

When Andy Erwin and the Kingdom Story team began to walk through the scenes they had shot for the movie, they had to make some very tough calls. Oftentimes, at this point in filmmaking, entire scenes and even actors' performances have to be cut to arrive at telling the best story in the allotted runtime and to make the movie as compelling as possible for the audience.

For *I Can Only Imagine 2*, because of the nature of our entire story during this season, the decision was made to keep the storyline focused on the theme of relationships between fathers and sons, a solution I fully supported. That meant Chris's death, and other events you will read about in these pages, would not be in the film. As the team began to work through early edits, they did some test screenings with small audiences. I was told that several people asked, "Did

all that *really* happen to them?” When I was told those reactions, I laughed and said, “Yes! And that’s not even the entire story!”

At the end of John’s Gospel, he wrote some very intriguing words: “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book” (20:30). Basically, the four Gospel writers had to each divinely choose what to include in their accounts of Jesus. John tells us in this verse that quite a few people and situations (for our purposes, some “scenes and actors”) had to be cut. As for our story, the film followed that biblically inspired principle. But that’s what I love about being able to also write a companion book—we get to tell you everything.

And, yes, “all this really happened.”