

Championship coach tackles God on the gridiron

by [Greg Garrison](#)

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (RNS) After Auburn University's football win over Clemson last season, coach Gene Chizik declared, "It's a God thing."

After the national championship game win over the University of Oregon, he told a national TV audience, "God was with us."

Chizik sees the hand of God working in his life, even in the outcome of college football games.

"The faith part is what's really important in my life," Chizik said in a telephone interview from Maine, where he was spending time on a lake with his wife and three children. "That guides us and keeps us grounded as we navigate this crazy world of college football. If you win, everybody tells you how great you are, and you're probably not that great. If you lose everybody tells you how terrible you are, and you're probably not that terrible."

It sure looked like God was raining down miracles on Chizik the last two or three years. He was hired as Auburn's head coach in 2008 despite a 5-19 record in two seasons at Iowa State. Cam Newton arrived as a quarterback savior for the 2010 season, won the Heisman Trophy and helped Auburn win the national championship.

Chizik describes all of that in a newly released memoir, "All In: What It Takes to Be the Best" from Tyndale House, an evangelical Christian publisher.

"`All In' is a story about football, family and faith," Chizik said.

"Those are three things that are important in my life."

In the 265-page book, written with sportswriter David Thomas of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, Chizik writes how he didn't expect to get the Auburn job, and the wrenching emotions of leaving his recruits behind at Iowa State.

"That's something that just weighed on my heart so much it tore me up," Chizik said. "The guy you recruited, he's thinking, 'You told me you'd be here.' Everything I told them, I told them with a pure and good heart. At the end of the day, you have to make decisions that are best for you and your family."

While Chizik was raised a Roman Catholic, his wife, Jonna, was raised a Methodist. While he worked at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, they began attending an evangelical church.

"It's a big part of who I've become," Chizik said, adding, "One of the things we don't do, we don't push anything on our young men when it comes to the message."

He does, however, try to mold them into morally responsible young men. "I was blessed to have a platform to influence young people."

Chizik doesn't spend much time writing about the controversy surrounding Newton's decision to come to Auburn, although he gives some anecdotes about how he tried to spur Newton into being a better player.

During the championship run it emerged that Newton's father, Cecil, a church pastor in Georgia, had tried to shop his son to Mississippi State University, requesting money from boosters for him to sign there. The NCAA found no evidence of any impropriety in his recruitment to Auburn.

Chizik admits he had no idea how good Newton was going to be, nor how controversy over his recruitment would hang like a fog around the program as it rose to amazing heights.

"You don't know what a quarterback is going to respond like until you put him out there in front of 90,000 people," Chizik said. "We knew we had a very talented, athletic quarterback. How he's going to respond

to those circumstances, you don't know. By game four, we knew what he could do."

Although Newton had a run-in with the law over a stolen laptop while he was Tim Tebow's backup at Florida, Chizik said he and his staff researched Newton's character and came away impressed.

"It became clear to us that this was a great kid," Chizik said. "If we were all judged based on mistakes we made when we were younger, a lot of us would be looking for work."

Cam Newton weathered the controversy without missing a game, completed a season for the ages and became the top pick in the NFL draft. Chizik said he remains committed to running a clean program and turning out men of moral character.

"It's all about educating players," Chizik said. "Ultimately, these guys have to make the right decisions for the program and their families. We tell them, 'If you encounter something that doesn't look right, doesn't smell right, you need to turn and run.'"

Chizik also said he's optimistic about defending the title next season.

"I feel good in terms of people," he said of the team. "We're into building this foundation for a long time. This is one brick in the foundation."

And, he added, the pressure to win hasn't lessened because of the national championship. "The pressure's always there to win," he said. "The standards are always high."

Chizik sums up his philosophy on the final page of his memoir.

"Championship rings are nice, but they are nothing compared to what God promises for those who are all in for him."