

Philip Yancey

Reaching for the  
Invisible God



what can we  
expect to find?

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## ROOM FOR DOUBT



*We both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour,  
which keeps Believing nimble.*

EMILY DICKINSON

I MUST EXERCISE FAITH simply to believe that God exists, a basic requirement for any relationship. And yet when I wish to explore how faith works, I usually sneak in by the back door of doubt, for I best learn about my own need for faith during its absence. God’s invisibility guarantees I will experience times of doubt.

Everyone dangles on a pendulum that swings from belief to unbelief, back to belief, and ends—where? Some never find faith. A woman asked Bertrand Russell, the world’s best-known atheist at the time, what he would say if it turned out he had been wrong and found himself standing outside the Pearly Gates. His eyes lighting up, Russell replied in his high, thin voice, “Why, I should say, ‘God, you gave us insufficient evidence!’”

Others have faith, then lose it. Peter De Vries, product of a strict Calvinist home and undergraduate studies at Calvin College, went on

to write savagely comic novels about the loss of faith. One of his characters “could not forgive God for not existing”—words that explain much of De Vries’s own God-obsessed work. His novel *The Blood of the Lamb* tells of Don Wanderhope, father of an eleven-year-old girl who contracts leukemia. Just as the bone marrow begins to respond to treatment and she approaches remission, an infection sweeps through the ward and kills her. Wanderhope, who has brought in a cake with his daughter’s name on it, leaves the hospital, returns to the church where he prayed for her healing, and hurls the cake at the crucifix hanging in front of the church. The cake hits just beneath the crown of thorns, and brightly colored icing drips down Jesus’ dejected face of stone.

I feel kinship with those who, like Russell, find it impossible to believe or, like De Vries, find it impossible to keep on believing in the face of apparent betrayal. I have been in a similar place at times, and I marvel that God bestowed on me an unexpected gift of faith. Examining my own periods of faithlessness, I see in them all manner of unbelief. Sometimes I shy away for lack of evidence, sometimes I slink away in hurt or disillusionment, and sometimes I turn aside in willful disobedience. Something, though, keeps drawing me back to God. What? I ask myself.

“This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” said Jesus’ disciples in words that resonate in every doubter. Jesus’ listeners found themselves simultaneously attracted and repelled, like a compass needle brought close to a magnet. As his words sank in, one by one the crowd of onlookers and followers slouched away, leaving only the Twelve. “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked them in a tone somewhere between plaintiveness and resignation. As usual, Simon Peter spoke up: “Lord, to whom shall we go?”

That, for me, is the bottom-line answer to why I stick around. To my shame, I admit that one of the strongest reasons I stay in the fold is the lack of good alternatives, many of which I have tried. *Lord, to whom shall I go?* The only thing more difficult than having a relationship with an invisible God is having no such relationship.



**G**OD OFTEN DOES HIS work through “holy fools,” dreamers who strike out in ridiculous faith, whereas I approach my own decisions with

calculation and restraint. In fact, a curious law of reversal seems to apply in matters of faith. The modern world honors intelligence, good looks, confidence, and sophistication. God, apparently, does not. To accomplish his work God often relies on simple, uneducated people who don't know any better than to trust him, and through them wonders happen. The least gifted person can become a master in prayer, because prayer requires only an intense desire to spend time with God.

My church in Chicago, a delightful mixture of races and economic groups, once scheduled an all-night vigil of prayer during a major crisis. Several people voiced concern. Was it safe, given our inner-city neighborhood? Should we hire guards or escorts for the parking lot? What if no one showed up? At length we discussed the practicality of the event before finally putting the night of prayer on the calendar.

The poorest members of the congregation, a group of senior citizens from a housing project, responded the most enthusiastically to the prayer vigil. I could not help wondering how many of their prayers had gone unanswered over the years—they lived in the projects, after all, amid crime, poverty, and suffering—yet still they showed a childlike trust in the power of prayer. “How long do you want to stay—an hour or two?” we asked, thinking of the logistics of van shuttles. “Oh, we'll stay all night,” they replied.

One African-American woman in her nineties, who walked with a cane and could barely see, explained to a staff member why she wanted to spend the night sitting on the hard pews of a church in an unsafe neighborhood. “You see, they's lots of things we can't do in this church. We ain't so educated, and we ain't got as much energy as some of you younger folks. But we can pray. We got time, and we got faith. Some of us don't sleep much anyway. We can pray all night if needs be.”

And so they did. Meanwhile, a bunch of yuppies in a downtown church learned an important lesson: Faith appears where least expected and falters where it should be thriving.

Despite my innate skepticism, I yearn for the kind of faith that came so naturally to those senior citizens, childlike faith that asks God for the impossible. I do so for one reason: Jesus prized such faith, as the miracle stories in the Gospels make clear. “Your faith has healed you,” Jesus would say, deflecting attention from himself to the healed person.

Miraculous power did not come from his side alone but somehow depended on the recipient.

Reading through all the miracle stories together, I see that faith comes in different degrees. A few people demonstrated bold, unshakable faith, such as a centurion who told Jesus he need not bother with a visit—just a word would heal his servant long-distance. “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith,” Jesus remarked, astonished. Another time, a foreign woman pursued Jesus as he was seeking peace and quiet. At first Jesus answered her not a word. Then he replied sharply, telling her he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel, not to “dogs.” Nothing could deter this stubborn Canaanite woman, and her perseverance won Jesus over. “Woman, you have great faith!” he said. These foreigners, the least likely people to demonstrate strong faith, impressed Jesus. Why should a centurion and a Canaanite, who both lacked Jewish roots, put their trust in a Messiah his own countrymen had trouble accepting?

In glaring contrast, the people who should have known better lagged in faith. Jesus’ own neighbors doubted him. John the Baptist, his cousin and forerunner, later questioned him. Among the twelve disciples Thomas doubted, Peter cursed, and Judas betrayed, all after spending three years with Jesus.

The same law of reversal I observed in my church in Chicago seems to apply in the Gospels: Faith appears where least expected and falters where it should be thriving. What gives me hope, though, is that Jesus worked with whatever grain of faith a person might muster. He did, after all, honor the faith of everyone who asked, from the bold centurion to doubting Thomas to the distraught father who cried, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

Noting the wide spectrum of faith represented in the Bible, I wonder whether people naturally divide into various “faith types” just as they divide into personality types. An introvert who approaches other people cautiously, I approach God the same way. And just as I tend to be calculated about my decisions, considering all sides, I also experience the curse of the “on the other hand” syndrome whenever I read a bright promise in the Bible. I used to feel constant guilt over my void of faith, and still I long for more, but increasingly I have come to terms with

my level of faith. We are not all shy or melancholic or introverted; why should we expect to have the same measure or kind of faith?



**D**OUBT IS THE SKELETON in the closet of faith, and I know no better way to treat a skeleton than to bring it into the open and expose it for what it is: not something to hide or fear, but a hard structure on which living tissue may grow. If I asked every person to stop reading whose faith has wavered—as a result of a tragedy, or a confidence-shaking encounter with science or with another religion, or disillusionment with the church or individual Christians—I might as well end the book with this sentence. Why, then, does the church treat doubt as an enemy? I was once asked to sign *Christianity Today* magazine’s statement of faith “without doubt or equivocation.” I had to tell them I can barely sign my own name without doubt or equivocation.

“I don’t know how the kind of faith required of a Christian living in the 20th century can be at all if it is not grounded on the experience of unbelief,” wrote novelist Flannery O’Connor to a friend. “Peter said, ‘Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.’ It is the most natural and most human and most agonizing prayer in the gospels, and I think it is the foundation prayer of faith.” O’Connor got her characters wrong (the quote comes from the demoniac’s father in Mark 9, not Peter) but her sentiments right. Doubt always coexists with faith, for in the presence of certainty who would need faith at all?

In my childhood I heard the old Scottish chorus, “Cheer up, ye saints of God, / there’s nothing to worry about, / nothing to make ye feel afraid, / nothing to make ye doubt.” I liked the rousing spirit of the song, especially if the singers rrrrolled their “r’s” in a Scottish brogue. Now, though, as I look at the words I wonder if the writer read the same Bible I read, a book whose heroes stagger from one daunting crisis to the next.

Job’s friends reacted to his doubts with shock and dismay. “Stop feeling that way! Shame on you for having such scandalous thoughts!” they said in effect. God, who had his own differences with Job, nonetheless held up Job, not the friends, as the hero. Books such as Job, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Lamentations show beyond question that God understands the value of human doubt, amply portraying it in sacred scripture.



Modern psychology teaches that since you can't really eliminate your feelings you might as well go ahead and express them openly, and the Bible seems to agree. Those who honestly confront their doubts often find themselves growing into a faith that transcends the doubts.

I need only mention a few Christian stalwarts to establish the prevalence, perhaps inevitability, of doubt. Martin Luther battled constantly against doubt and depression. "For more than a week," Luther once wrote, "Christ was wholly lost. I was shaken by desperation and blasphemy against God." The Puritan Richard Baxter rested his faith on "probabilities instead of full undoubted certainties"; fellow-Puritan Increase Mather wrote entries in his diary such as "Greatly molested with temptations to atheism." A church in Boston delayed evangelist Dwight L. Moody's application to join, his beliefs seemed so uncertain. Missionary C. F. Andrews, a friend of Gandhi, found himself unable to lead his Indian congregation in the Athanasian Creed because of doubts. British mystic Evelyn Underhill admitted to times when "the whole spiritual scheme seems in question."

Reading the biographies of great people of faith, I must search to find one whose faith did *not* grow on a skeleton of doubt, and indeed grow so that the skeleton eventually became hidden. In his novel *The Flight of Peter Fromm*, Martin Gardner has a professor suggest that today's intellectually honest Christian must choose between being a truthful traitor or a loyal liar. Adam, Sarah, Jacob, Job, Jeremiah, Jonah, Thomas, Martha, Peter, and many other characters in the Bible demonstrate a third category: the loyal traitor, who questions, squirms, and rebels yet still remains loyal. God appears far less threatened by doubt than does his church.

The church owes a large debt to loyal traitors. At various times, church officials insisted on an earth 6000 years young, opposed medicines as obstructions against God's will, supported slavery, and ranked certain races (and also women) as inferior beings. Doubters questioned these and other dogmas, often bringing on themselves condemnation and persecution.

In *A Prayer for Owen Meany* novelist John Irving describes a teacher who made faith attractive because he valued doubt. Irving was probably alluding to his own boarding school teacher Frederick Buechner, whom he thanks at the front of the book. Buechner takes for granted that a relationship between an invisible God and visible humans will always involve an element of doubt: "Without somehow destroying me in the process,

how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.”



HAVING SAID SO MANY laudatory things about doubt, I need also acknowledge that doubt may lead a person away from faith rather than toward it. In my case, doubt has prompted me to question many things that need questioning and also to investigate alternatives to faith, none of which measure up. I remain a Christian today due to my doubts. For many others, though, doubt has had the opposite effect, working like a nerve disease to cause a slow and painful spiritual paralysis. Nearly every week I answer a letter from someone tormented by doubts. Their suffering is as acute and debilitating as any suffering I know.

Although we cannot control doubt, which often creeps up on us uninvited, we can learn to channel it in ways that make doubt more likely to be nourishing than toxic. For starters, I try to approach my doubts with the humility appropriate to my creaturely status.

I have often wondered why the Bible does not give clear answers to certain questions. God had the perfect opportunity to address the problem of pain in his speech at the end of Job, the longest single speech by God in the Bible, yet avoided the topic entirely. The Bible treats other important issues with slight hints and clues, not direct pronouncements. I have a theory why, which I freely admit ventures into personal opinion.

I have a book on my desk titled *The Encyclopedia of Ignorance*. Its author explains that whereas most encyclopedias compile information that we know, he will attempt to outline the areas of science we cannot yet explain: questions of cosmology, curved space, the riddles of gravitation, the interior of the sun, human consciousness. I wonder if God has perhaps fenced off an area of knowledge, “The Encyclopedia of Theological Ignorance,” for very good reasons. These answers remain in God’s domain, and God has not seen fit to reveal them.

Consider infant salvation. Most theologians have found enough biblical clues to convince them that God welcomes all infants “under the age of accountability,” though the biblical evidence is scant. What if God had made a clear pronouncement: “Thus saith the Lord, I will welcome every child under the age of ten into heaven.” I can easily envision Crusaders

of the eleventh century mounting a campaign to slaughter every child of nine or younger in order to guarantee their eternal salvation—which of course would mean that none of us would be around a millennium later to contemplate such questions. Similarly, the zealous conquistadors in Latin America might have finished off the native peoples for good if the Bible had clearly stated that God’s overlooking “the times of ignorance” applied to all who had not heard the name of Jesus.

Reading church history, not to mention reflecting on my own life, is a humbling exercise indeed. In view of the mess we have made of crystal-clear commands—the unity of the church, love as a mark of Christians, racial and economic justice, the importance of personal purity, the dangers of wealth—I tremble to think what we would do if some of the ambiguous doctrines were less ambiguous.

Our approach to difficult issues should befit our status as finite creatures. Take the doctrine of God’s sovereignty, taught in the Bible in such a way that it stands in unresolved tension with human freedom. God’s perspective as an all-powerful being who sees all of history at once, rather than unfolding second by second, has baffled theologians and will always baffle theologians simply because that point of view is unattainable to us, even unimaginable by us. The best physicists in the world struggle to explain the multidirectional arrows of time. A humble approach accepts that difference in perspective and worships a God who transcends our limitations.

Hyper-Calvinists show what happens when we seize prerogatives that no human can bear. Thus Malthusians opposed vaccination for smallpox because, they said, it interfered with God’s sovereign will. Calvinist churches discouraged early missionaries: “Young man . . . when God pleases to convert the heathen, He’ll do it without your help or mine,” they told William Carey, ignoring the obvious fact that *we* are the ones chosen by God to carry the good news worldwide. After Calvin drew a solid line between the elect and the reprobate, his followers then inferred that we humans can discern who falls on which side of that line. The Book of Life belongs in the category of “theological ignorance,” something we cannot know and for which (thankfully) we must trust God.

Of course, we must and should investigate some of the issues occupying the margins of doctrine. I have found consolation, for example, in C. S. Lewis’s depiction in *The Great Divorce* of hell as a place that people

choose, and continue to choose even when they end up there. As Milton's Satan put it, "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven." Still, I must insist that the most important questions about heaven and hell—who goes where, whether there are second chances, what form the judgments and rewards take, intermediate states after death—are opaque to us at best. More and more, I am grateful for that ignorance, and grateful that the God who revealed himself in Jesus is the one who determines the answers.



**O**VER TIME, I HAVE grown more comfortable with mystery rather than certainty. God does not twist arms and never forces us into a corner with faith in himself as the only exit. We can never present the Final Proof, to ourselves or to anyone else. We will always, with Pascal, see "too much to deny and too little to be sure . . ."

I look to Jesus, God laid bare to human view, for proof of God's refusal to twist arms. Jesus often made it harder, not easier, for people to believe. He never violated an individual's freedom to decide, even to decide against him. I marvel at how gently Jesus handled the reports of John the Baptist's doubts in prison, and how tenderly he restored Peter after his brusque betrayal. And Jesus' story of the prodigal son reveals a divine attitude of forgiveness-in-advance that may seem indulgent and risky, but it did restore a dead son to life.

"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free," said Jesus. I love that sweeping, magisterial statement, because I have concluded its converse is also true: "Truth" that does not set free is not truth. Those who heard Jesus make the statement took up stones to kill him. They were unprepared for that kind of freedom, and so the church has often been. Read Aldous Huxley's *The Devils of Loudon*, any biography of Joan of Arc, or an account of the Salem witch trials, and you will see the extremes of a church threatened by freedom.

The church environment I grew up in had no room for doubt. "Just believe!" they told us. Anyone who strayed from the defined truth risked punishment as a deviant. In Bible College my brother received an "F" on a speech that, in the 1960s, had the effrontery to suggest that rock music is not inherently immoral. Although my brother was a classical musician who in fact had no taste for rock music, he could find no biblical support

for the arguments about rock music made at that school. I have heard my brother speak many times—he was a competitive debater—and saw the notes for his presentation, and have no doubt that he received an “F” for one reason: the teacher disagreed with his conclusion. More, the teacher concluded that *God* disagreed with his conclusion. A failing grade in an undergraduate class hardly ranks with the punishment meted out by the judges in Salem or Loudon. My brother did not lose his life; he left the school. He also left the faith, however, and has never returned—in large part, I believe, because he did not observe truth setting people free and never found a church that makes room for prodigals.

I had a very different experience from my brother’s. In my pilgrimage I found a grace-filled church and a community of Christians who formed a safe place for my doubts. I note in the Gospels that Jesus’ disciple Thomas kept company with the other disciples even though he could not believe their accounts of Jesus’ resurrection—the *sine qua non* of any doctrinal statement—and it was amid that community that Jesus appeared in order to strengthen Thomas’s faith. In a similar way, my friends and colleagues at *Campus Life* magazine, then *Christianity Today*, and LaSalle Street Church in Chicago created a haven of acceptance that carried me along when my faith wavered. I could say before a church class I taught, “I know I should believe this, but truthfully, I’m having trouble right now.” I feel sad for lonely doubters; we all need trustworthy doubt-companions.

The church at its best prepares a safe and secure space that belief may one day fill; we need not bring fully formed belief to the door, as a ticket for admission. When I began to write openly about doubt, and questioned some of the dogmas of evangelicalism, I expected rejection and punishment, such as I had received in adolescence. Instead I found that the angry, condemnatory letters were vastly outnumbered by others from readers who affirmed my questions and my right to question. Gradually those doubts settled into a lesser place, or found resolution, and they did so, I think, because fear melted away. I learned that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear.

One of John Donne’s Holy Sonnets contains the mysterious line, “Churches are best for prayer, that have least light.” The phrase can be taken several ways, the most literal referring to cathedrals lit only by candles. Given Donne’s own harrowing history with the church, though, most readers see a further meaning: Churches that leave room for mys-

tery, that do not pretend to spell out what God himself has not spelled out, create an environment most conducive to worship. After all, we lean on God out of need, not out of surplus.

Why then, do so many churches strive to appear bright and well-lit?



**I**N A FAMOUS ALLEGORICAL dilemma, a fourteenth-century French monk told of a donkey who confronts two equally attractive, equally distant bales of hay. The animal stares, hesitates, stares some more, and eventually perishes because he has no logical justification for moving toward one bale or the other.

Without an element of risk, there is no faith. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote of Herman Melville, “He can neither believe nor be content in his disbelief.” Like the donkey torn between two bales, this middle ground may represent the greatest danger, because it removes passion in a person’s relationship with God. Faith becomes a kind of intellectual puzzle, which is never biblical faith.

Faith means striking out, with no clear end in sight and perhaps even no clear view of the next step. It means following, trusting, holding out a hand to an invisible Guide. As Thomas Graham, dean of a theological school, put it, faith is reason gone courageous—not the opposite of reason, to be sure, but something more than reason and never satisfied by reason alone. A step always remains beyond the range of light.

One year a friend came to visit me in late June for the specific purpose of climbing mountains. Late-season snow made all but a few mountains inaccessible, so we settled on one of the easiest, Mount Sherman. Normally, a hiker can follow a gentle trail that winds right to the obvious summit. As we started from the trail head, however, we realized that a summer snowstorm had changed everything. Occasionally the clouds would part enough to give us a view of what we thought might be the summit, but then the sky would close tight around us in a total whiteout.

False summits—and most mountains have them—present a trial for the climber. For three hours you glance every few seconds at the top. Your eyes are pulled by a force like gravitation; you cannot resist looking at the massive peak that is luring you up its side. Then, just when you reach the top, you realize it is not the top at all. Perspective from below

has fooled you. You see the real summit a half-mile ahead. Or is that too a false summit?

In the climb up Mount Sherman, we began in snow and clouds and ended in snow and clouds, and saw little in between. When a true white-out settles in, you lose all orientation with the horizon and cannot tell if you are ascending, descending, or walking upside down. You strike out blind—which, on mountains as craggy as the Rockies, may well prove fatal.

My partner and I discussed turning back and decided against it. We sat and waited for the clouds to clear a little, picked a spot and marked a compass bearing, then struck out again. When the clouds closed in, we sat in the wet snow and waited for another break.

Aware of avalanche danger, we deliberately chose a longer route that circled the gentler slopes of the mountain. In the cloud cover, we would hear the ominous crackling sounds of avalanches breaking loose from the other peaks around us. The heavy air made each one sound as if it was bearing right down on us, though intellectually we knew differently—we thought. Sitting in snow in the middle of a cloud, with a sound like sonic booms ricocheting all around makes one question maps, compasses, sense organs, and reason itself.

We had judged correctly, though, and no avalanches hit nearby. Clouds parted long enough to give us a glimpse of a ledge leading directly to the true summit, and with care we managed to make it. The sign-in cylinder at the top, buried in snow, indicated that we were the first hikers that season to ascend Mount Sherman. Then came the fun part. Clouds broke up, we could choose our slopes, and what took four hours to ascend took less

than an hour to descend—on our backs, sliding like tobogganers down slopes slick with new snow.

That climb, as I reflected on it later, recapitulated what I have learned about the pilgrimage of faith. It involves miscalculations, thrills and hardship, long periods of waiting and long periods of simply trudging. No matter how thoroughly I prepare, make

When we get our spiritual house in order, we'll be dead. This goes on. You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way, but it is making it in darkness. Don't expect faith to clear things up for you. It is trust, not certainty.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

precautions, and try to eliminate risk, I never succeed. Always there are times of whiteout, when I can see nothing and avalanches roar down around me.

When I reach the summit though, nothing in the world compares to that feeling of accomplishment and exaltation. Yet Mount Sherman is, after all, only one 14,000-foot mountain in Colorado. I have fifty-two to go.



## FAITH UNDER FIRE



*It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ.  
My hosanna is born of a furnace of doubt.*

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKI

I IDENTIFY WITH THE poet Anne Sexton, who said she loved faith but had little. My own skeptical traits I acquired largely in church: listening to “testimonies” I later learned were faked, seeing the hypocrisies of spiritual leaders, hearing people praise God for miraculous healing the week before they died. Virtually any “answer to prayer,” I discovered, had other possible explanations, and I hastened to find them. Eventually I outgrew the stage of wanting to poke holes in other people’s faith, but the habit of skepticism lingers, along with a strong aversion to faith abuse.

Because I have written about pain and suffering, I have a file drawer filled with letters from earnest Christians who pray—for their child with a birth defect, for an inoperable brain tumor, for reversal of paralysis—who seek anointing with oil and follow every biblical admonition, and yet who find no relief from suffering, no reward for their faith. I have also asked

numerous Christian physicians if they have ever witnessed an undeniable medical miracle. Most think for a minute and come up with one possibility, maybe two.

Strangely, spending my time writing about the Christian faith makes it no easier. A friend commented about Christians in general, “If you repeat anything to yourself often enough, you can believe it.” Is that what I do? I go over and over the words, trying to get them just right. But how can I know whether I truly believe them or am just repeating them to myself, like a telephone solicitor rehearsing a sales pitch? When dealing with an invisible God, doubts inevitably steal in.

For reasons such as these I have always hesitated to write about faith, afraid of causing someone else to lose theirs. Although I do not want to discourage anyone’s simple faith, neither do I want to raise unrealistic expectations of what faith might achieve. “Tempting God means trying to get more assurance than God has given,” said the wise bishop Lesslie Newbigin. I have to face the honest fact that Christians live in poverty, get sick, lose their hair and teeth, and wear eyeglasses at approximately the same rate as everyone else. Christians die at exactly the same rate: 100 percent.

We live on a fallen planet full of suffering from which even the Son of God was not exempt. During their lifetimes, Jesus and the apostle Paul\* both prayed for easier ways to cope on such a planet, and neither got relief. The sociologist Bronislaw Malinowski drew this distinction between magic and religion: In magic, people try to get the gods to perform their will, while in religion people try to conform to the will of the gods. Christian faith means conforming to the will of God whatever it may mean. “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me,” Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. It was not possible, and he added submissively, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

George Everett Ross makes the same point as Malinowski in different words:

I have served in the ministry thirty years, almost thirty-one. I have come to understand that there are two kinds of faith. One says

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\* Paul describes his dire circumstances in 1 Corinthians: “To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. . . . Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.” In the next letter he tells of his unsuccessful prayers to have a “thorn in the flesh” removed.

if and the other says though. One says: “If everything goes well, if my life is prosperous, if I’m happy, if no one I love dies, if I’m successful, then I will believe in God and say my prayers and go to the church and give what I can afford.” The other says though: though the cause of evil prosper, though I sweat in Gethsemane, though I must drink my cup at Calvary—nevertheless, precisely then, I will trust the Lord who made me. So Job cries: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him.”

I have friends who see a demon behind every bush and an angel behind every vacant parking place, and I sometimes marvel at what their simple faith accomplishes. When there is no miracle, however, when they need something closer to long-term fidelity than short-term wonder, I note that they turn to people with a more cautious and longsuffering faith.

The Bible models both simple faith and hang-on-against-all-odds fidelity. Job, Abraham, Habakkuk and his fellow prophets, as well as many of the heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11, endured long droughts when miracles did not happen, when urgent prayers dropped back to earth unanswered, when God seemed not just invisible but wholly absent. We who follow in their path today may sometimes experience times of unusual closeness when God seems responsive to our every need; we may also experience times when God stays silent and all the Bible’s promises seem glaringly false.



**O**N MY TRAVELS OVERSEAS I have noticed a striking difference in the wording of prayers. Christians in affluent countries tend to pray, “Lord, take this trial away from us!” I have heard prisoners, persecuted Christians, and some who live in very poor countries pray instead, “Lord, give us the strength to bear this trial.”

Paradoxically, difficult times may help nourish faith and strengthen bonds. I see this in human relationships, which tend to solidify in times of crisis. My wife and I both have grandmothers who have lived past 100 (in the year 2000 they entered their third century!). Talking with them and their friends, I detect a trend that seems almost universal in the reminiscences of older people: they recall difficult, tumultuous times with a touch of nostalgia. The elderly swap stories about World War II and the

Great Depression; they speak fondly of hardships such as blizzards, the childhood outhouse, and the time in college when they ate canned soup and stale bread three weeks in a row.

Ask a strong, stable family where they got such strength, and you may very well hear a story of crisis: huddling together in a hospital waiting room, waiting anxiously for some word of a runaway son, sorting through the rubble after a tornado, comforting a daughter after her broken engagement. Relationships gain strength when they are stretched to the breaking point and do not break.

Seeing this principle lived out among people, I can better understand one of the mysteries of relating to God. Faith boils down to a question of trust in a given relationship. Do I have confidence in my loved ones—or in God, as the case may be? If I do stand on a bedrock of trust, the worst of circumstances will not destroy the relationship.

Abraham climbing the hill with his son at Moriah, Job scratching his boils under the hot sun, David hiding in a cave, Elijah moping in a desert, Moses pleading for a new job description—all these heroes experienced crisis moments that sorely tempted them to judge God as uncaring, powerless, or even hostile. Confused and in the dark, they faced a turning point: whether to turn away embittered or step forward in faith. In the end, all chose the path of trust, and for this reason we remember them as giants of faith.

Unfortunately, not everyone passes these tests of faith with flying colors. The Bible is littered with tales of others—Cain, Samson, Solomon, Judas—who flunked. Their lives give off a scent of sadness and remorse: Oh, what might have been.

One Christian thinker, Søren Kierkegaard, spent a lifetime exploring the tests of faith that call into question God's trustworthiness. A strange man with a difficult personality, Kierkegaard lived with constant inner torment. Again and again he turned to biblical characters like Job and Abraham, who survived excruciating trials of faith. During their times of testing, it appeared to both Job and Abraham that God was contradicting himself. *God surely would not act in such a way—yet clearly he is.* Kierkegaard ultimately concluded that the purest faith emerges from just such an ordeal. Even though I do not understand, I will trust God regardless.

I have learned much from Kierkegaard and his unbalanced view of faith. I say unbalanced because Kierkegaard focuses so intently on the great ordeals of faith and has little to say about the day-to-day maintenance aspects of a relationship with God. He describes “knights of faith,” those few individuals selected by God for some extraordinary feat. They were tested as today we might test a jet plane: not to destroy but rather to gauge the limits of usefulness. “Would it not have been better, after all, if he were not God’s chosen?” Kierkegaard once asked about Abraham. No doubt Abraham himself asked that question during his ordeals, but I doubt he asked it at the end of his life.

For the believer, faith revolves around a crisis in personal relationship more than intellectual doubts. Does God deserve our trust, no matter how things appear at the time?



**A** CHRISTIAN AUTHOR WHOM I love and respect writes, “The way God arranges things sometimes seems uniquely designed to frustrate us: a tire goes flat on the way to the hospital, the sink backs up an hour before overnight company arrives, a friend lets you down during a time when you most need support, you suddenly develop laryngitis the day of your presentation to important buyers.” To Christians in places like Pakistan and Sudan, these trials must seem obscenely insignificant. Yet I know well that a series of annoyances exactly like these can introduce a seed of doubt in my relationship with God and undermine my basic trust.

I find myself stumbling over my friend’s phrase “The way God arranges things,” however. Does God indeed position a nail in the road so that I will run over it on the way to the hospital? Does he wind hairs around the sink trap so that it will clog just before company arrives? I too instinctively blame God when bad things happen, calling into question any relationship of trust. Should I? Does God arrange flat tires, computer crashes, and viral germs in my life as custom tests of faith, similar to the tests of faith that Abraham and Job endured? I doubt it.

If the Book of Job teaches one lesson, especially in God’s speech at the end, it is that human beings have no business, let alone competence, in trying to figure out all the intricacies of why things happen. Instead, God challenged Job to do any better:

Do you have an arm like God's,  
 and can your voice thunder like his?  
 Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor,  
 and clothe yourself in honor and majesty.  
 Unleash the fury of your wrath,  
 look at every proud man and bring him low,  
 look at every proud man and humble him,  
 crush the wicked where they stand.

God restrains from continual interference with what takes place on earth, declining to humble every proud man and crush the wicked where they stand, for reasons that continue to perplex their victims. We, like Job, assume that God has somehow arranged all events, then draw conclusions that are patently false: *God doesn't love me. God is not fair.* Faith offers the option of continuing to trust God even while accepting the limits of our humanity, which means accepting that we cannot answer the "Why?" questions.

When Princess Diana died in an automobile crash I got a phone call from a television producer. "Can you appear on our show?" he asked. "We want you to explain how God could possibly allow such a terrible accident." Without thinking, I replied, "Could it have had something to do with a drunk driver going ninety miles an hour in a narrow tunnel? How, exactly, was God involved?"

I could not make the television appearance, but his question prompted me to dig out a file folder in which I have stashed notes of things for which God gets blamed. I found a quote from boxer Ray "Boom-Boom" Mancini, who had just killed a Korean opponent with a hard right. At a press conference after the Korean boxer's death, Mancini said, "Sometimes I wonder why God does the things he does." In a letter to Dr. James Dobson, a young woman asked this anguished question: "Four years ago, I was dating a man and became pregnant. I was devastated! I asked God, 'Why have You allowed this to happen to me?'" Susan Smith, the South Carolina mother who pushed her two sons into a lake to drown, then blamed a phantom car-jacker for the deed, wrote in her official confession: "I dropped to the lowest point when I allowed my children to go down that ramp into the water without me. I took off run-

ning and screaming, ‘Oh God! Oh God, no! What have I done? Why did you let this happen?’”

Exactly what role did God play in a boxer pummeling his opponent, a teenage couple losing control in a backseat, or a mother drowning her children? I wonder. Did God arrange these incidents as tests of faith? To the contrary, I see them as spectacular demonstrations of human freedom exercised on a fallen planet. At such moments, exposed as frail and mortal, we lash out against someone who is not: God.

Having examined every instance of human suffering recorded in the Bible, I have come away convinced that many Christians who face a trial of faith attempt to answer a different question than God is asking. By instinct we flee to the questions that look backward in time: What caused this tragedy? Was God involved? What is God trying to tell me? We judge the relationship on such incomplete evidence.

The Bible gives many examples of suffering that, like Job’s, have nothing to do with God’s punishment. In all his miracles of healing, Jesus overturned the notion, widespread at the time, that suffering—blindness, lameness, leprosy—comes to people who deserve it. Jesus grieved over many things that happen on this planet, a sure sign that God regrets them far more than we do. Not once did Jesus counsel someone to accept suffering as God’s will; rather he went about healing illness and disability.

The Bible supplies no systematic answers to the “Why?” questions and often avoids them entirely. A flat tire, a backed-up sink, a case of laryngitis—these tests, however minor, may well provoke a crisis of trust in our relationship with God. Yet we dare not tread into areas God has sealed off as his domain. Divine providence is a mystery that only God understands, and belongs in what I have called “The Encyclopedia of Theological Ignorance” for a simple reason: no time-bound human, living on a rebellious planet, blind to the realities of the unseen world, has the ability to comprehend such answers—God’s reply to Job in a nutshell.



CHRISTIANS OFTEN READ THE Bible in such a way that exaggerates God’s promises, setting themselves up for later disillusionment. “Look at the birds of the air,” Jesus once said; “they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. . . . See

how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin.” From such verses, readers infer that God will always provide, which then brings about a major crisis of faith when drought and famine arrive.

But how does the heavenly Father feed the birds and make the lilies grow? He does not cause black-oiled sunflower seeds to appear magically on the ground like manna in the wilderness. He feeds the birds by furnishing the planet with forests, wildflowers, and worms—and we humans know well that our subdivisions and strip malls can have a disastrous impact on the bird population. The lilies of the field may grow without labor, but their growth also depends on the regular systems that produce weather. In years of severe drought, they neither labor nor spin nor survive.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?” Jesus also said. “Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” Some take that passage as a comfort: “His eye is on the sparrow,” goes the song, “And I know he watches me.” Ironically, Jesus said it in the midst of dire warnings to his followers that they would face floggings, arrest, and even execution—hardly much comfort.\* Jacques Ellul points out a common mistranslation: the Greek text simply has, “apart from your Father,” and says nothing about God’s will:

It is to make things plain that “will” has been added. But the addition changes the meaning completely. In the one case, God wills the death of the sparrow, in the other death does not take place without God being present. In other words, death comes according to natural laws, but God lets nothing in his creation die without being there, without being the comfort and strength and hope and support of that which dies. At issue is the presence of God, not his will.

We tend to view God’s interactions with events on earth as coming “from above,” like light rays or hailstones or Zeus’s lightning bolts falling to the ground from the heavens. Thus God in heaven reaches down to

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\* One of Doris Betts’s characters has a more realistic view: “God knows the sparrows fall, but they keep falling. Ain’t creation just one dead bird after another?”



intervene on earth through events like the ten plagues. Perhaps we would do better to picture God's interaction as an underground aquifer or river that rises to the surface in springs and fountainheads. Father Robert Farrar Capon, in *The Parables of Judgment*, makes this shift in perspective from above to below, presenting God's acts as "outcroppings, as emergences into plain sight of the tips of the one, continuous iceberg under all of history. Thus, when we draw in our same previous series of mighty acts, they become not *forays into history* of an alien presence from above but *outcroppings within history* of an abiding presence from below."

In other words, God does not so much overrule as underrule. His presence sustains all creation at every moment: "in him [Christ] all things hold together," said Paul. His presence also flows into individuals who align themselves with him; God's Spirit, an invisible companion, works from within to wrest good from bad.



**M**ANY CHRISTIANS QUOTE THE verse Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him," with the implication that somehow everything will turn out for the best. The Greek original text is more properly translated, "In everything that happens, God works for good with those who love him." That promise, I have found to hold true in all the disasters and hardships I have known personally. Things happen, some of them good, some of them bad, many of them beyond our control. In all these things, I have felt the reliable constant of a God willing to work with me and through me to produce something good. Faith in such a process will, I'm convinced, always be rewarded, even though the "Why?" questions go unanswered.

A story from John 9 illustrates the difference in approach. The story starts where many sick people start, with the question of cause. Encountering a man blind from birth, the disciples look backward to find out why. Who sinned to bring on this punishment, the blind man or his parents? (Think about the implication: had the man sinned *in utero*?) Jesus answers unequivocally: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." Redirecting their attention forward, Jesus poses a different question, "To what end?"

Jesus' response, I believe, offers a concise summary of the Bible's approach to the problem of pain. Thornton Wilder wrote *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* to investigate why five particular people died in a bridge collapse. When asked about a similar tragedy—why did eighteen people die in a construction accident?—Jesus refused to answer. Instead, he turned the question back on the askers: Would you be ready for death if a tower fell on you? In Jesus' view, even tragedy could be used to push a person toward God. Rather than looking backward for explanations, he looked forward for redemptive results.

To backward-looking questions of cause, to the “Why?” questions, the Bible gives no definitive answer. But it does hold out hope for the future, that even suffering can be transformed so that it produces good results. Sometimes, as with the blind man, the work of God is manifest through a dramatic miracle. Sometimes, as with Joni Eareckson and so many others who pray for healing that never comes, it is not. In every case, suffering offers an opportunity for us to display the work of God, whether in weakness or in strength. The “miracle” of Joni Eareckson—a teenager devastated by paralysis who becomes a prophetess for the disabled to the rest of the church—demonstrates that abundantly. Knowing Joni since her teenage days, I firmly believe the transformation worked in her is even more impressive than if she had suddenly regained her ability to walk. “Storms are the triumph of his [God's] art,” said the poet George Herbert.

I am writing these words just after the tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, not far from my home. Every day, newspapers and television programs here dissect the event in excruciating detail. The funerals of twelve students and one teacher have been broadcast live. Ministers, parents, school administrators, and everyone touched by the tragedy ask “Why?” and no one has an answer. The element of evil—hate-filled, racist teenagers spraying their classmates with automatic weapons—looms so large in this particular tragedy that no one publicly links God to the event. Some ask why God does not intervene at such a time, but no one suggests God *caused* that outbreak of violence.

You would have to live in Colorado to appreciate fully the answer to the other question posed by the tragedy: Can any good come out of such horror? Can it be redeemed? A week after the killings I visited the hill in

Clement Park on which fifteen crosses stood, sifted through the pile of flower bouquets, athletic jackets, stuffed animals, and other mementos, and read some of the handwritten notes of love and support that poured in from all over the world. I also read the notes written to the two killers, personal notes from other misfits and outcasts lamenting that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had not found friends to confide in who could ease their pain. I attended churches that spontaneously filled with hundreds of grieving worshipers the days and weeks following the event. I watched the *Today Show* as Craig Scott, brother of one of the victims, put his hand on the shoulder of the father of the one African-American student killed and comforted him, even as Katie Couric broke down on the air. I heard friends of students describe their classmates' bravery as a gunman pointed his weapon at their heads and demanded, "Do you believe in God?" I heard of other results: of youth groups swelling all over the city, of teachers apologizing to their classes for not having identified themselves as Christians, and inviting students to meet them after school for grief counseling, of the father of one victim becoming an evangelist and the father of another leading a gun-control crusade. Out of evil, even terrible evil such as the Columbine massacre, good may come.

For many people, it takes the jolt of tragedy, illness, or death to create an existential crisis of faith. At such a moment, we want clarity; God wants our trust. A Scottish preacher in the last century lost his wife suddenly,

and after her death he preached an unusually personal sermon. He admitted in the message that he did not understand this life of ours. But still less could he understand how people facing loss could abandon faith. "Abandon it for what!" he said. "You people in the sunshine may believe the faith, but we in the shadow *must* believe it. We have nothing else."

*elo*  
**I**f knowing answers to life's questions is absolutely necessary to you, then forget the journey. You will never make it, for this is a journey of unknowables — of unanswered questions, enigmas, incomprehensibles, and most of all, things unfair.

MADAME JEANNE GUYON