

CHAPTER 1

AN HONEST LOOK AT CHRISTIAN LIFE

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Jesus Christ from the cross,

Matthew 27:46

LIFE CAN BE SO UNSETTLING—IN ONE MOMENT, YOU MIGHT BE STANDING on top of the world, feeling totally in control of your life, and in the blink of an eye, you’re watching helplessly as the world smashes you and all your carefully-laid plans into tiny pieces.

A faith dilemma can be caused by a single, unexpected, disastrous event, or by multiple lesser ones. It can be caused by a prolonged illness, or several short ones. It can even be caused by recurring financial, relationship, or work problems. The list is endless.

These tough times can be horrifically lonely if you can’t find solace from God’s presence. And if you also feel like he’s misled you, the pain of betrayal hurts even more.

A MAJOR MISCONCEPTION ABOUT CHRISTIAN LIFE

Does a successful Christian life consist of continuous well-being and joy? Is it wrong to question God or get intensely angry with him?

Plenty of Christian pastors and laypersons steadfastly believe that so long as they are walking in faithful obedience, it’s not God’s will that any of his children would suffer. These Christians are convinced they’ve developed a “spiritual success” formula for their lives that’s

Bible-supported and guarantees them success and happiness: “Trust and obey, then all will go well for us.”

Along with King Hezekiah, each one naively thinks, “*Surely nothing bad will happen in my lifetime. I’ll enjoy peace and stability as long as I live.*”¹ These misinformed church people are resolutely wedded to the concept that the Christian life is one of victory, joy, good health, and financial prosperity—that their happiness will be ensured by praying, obeying God, and reading the Bible.

Untold numbers of Christ-followers believe that if a believer undergoes illness, economic downturn, a failed religious project, or a severe depression, it’s a manifestation of some kind of religious disobedience. And that if this believer questions God’s ways, or vents anger toward him, many will chalk it up to a lack of faith. These judgmental Christians accuse other faith-plagued believers with the guilt trip, “You’ve messed up, or none of this stuff would be happening to you.”

The bottom line is that we live in a broken world, where sin and pain taints every person and every situation, regardless of a person’s spirituality or religious zeal.

UNDERSTANDING THE REALITY OF LIFE’S UNFAIRNESS

Why do some people face more misfortunes than others? Some of us seem to be broadsided by one bad thing after another, while others seem to only encounter minor speed bumps.

But, sooner or later, everyone suffers in some way. Psychiatrist Scott Peck’s book *The Road Less Traveled* opens with the stark phrase, “Life is difficult.” The harsh fact of life is that heartache and setbacks happen. Being a nice person or a devout Christian doesn’t insulate a person from pain. Fine, loving people face awful situations just as often as mean ones do. Letdowns, failures, catastrophes, tragedies, and betrayals are part of life.

No matter what its form, suffering plays no favorites. Jesus never sugarcoated the reality of life’s unjustness. He explained that God “*causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*”²

It's probably easy for you, as it is for me, to *intellectually* accept the spiritual realities of unjust suffering as something beyond our comprehension. We can agree with God when he says, "*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*"³

Yet when we're *in the midst* of unjust circumstances, it's hard to accept that reality. I easily identify with the Old Testament hero Job, who complained bitterly about his wrongful treatment and horrific losses: "*God has no right to treat me like this—it isn't fair!*"⁴

In fact, several years ago, I complained to my eighty-four-year-old dietitian about my unjust circumstances. Her response was priceless: "Jim, face it, life isn't fair! The Fair is in Pomona!" (the city in Southern California that hosts the area's largest fair).

Have you come to grips with life's unfairness and, in particular, your own raw deals?

EXPERIENCING FAITH-TESTING EVENTS THAT ROCK YOUR BELIEFS

For the most part, your Christian life, like mine, may be a relatively smooth journey as you enjoy special times of closeness with God and receive obvious answers to prayers. That is, until your faith is tested by a traumatic event, or a relentless series of smaller setbacks. Anger, anxiety, and questioning then become daily companions.

When things go bad in those moments, days, months, and even years, it's rarely just *one* thing happening. It's *every* thing. During this turning point, your once-steady, predictable spot in God's universe can suddenly feel like you're in the pilot seat of a fighter jet, shot down and spiraling toward the ground for a fiery crash.

My own spiritual crisis hit me hard. Moses's troubled words to God haunted me: "*Why have you brought this trouble on your servant?*"⁵ Oh, how I recognized the psalmist's words of misery: "*I counted on you, God. Why did you walk out on me?*"⁶

Poor Job articulated my darker thoughts: "*Yet when I hoped for good, evil came; when I looked for light, then came darkness. The churning inside me never stops; days of suffering confront me.*"⁷

Perhaps you, like Job and I, feel cornered, scared, betrayed, uncertain

of what you did wrong to deserve this, and unsure of what will happen next. Maybe you are simply confused about how to regain your sense of God's reassuring presence or his intervention in your life.

In *Words of Endurance*, an online devotional, former major league baseball pitcher Dave Dravecky wrote, "When we are overwhelmed by pain—when our circumstances scream, 'This makes no sense!'—we want relief. If we can't escape the pain, we at least want some kind of explanation. When we have to endure what seems the unendurable, we want the comfort of knowing that God sees clearly and still holds our future in his able hands."

During this gloom-filled emptiness, it may feel as if everything you know about God and life is up for grabs. There's a devastating confusion of meaning and purpose, and a lack of any kind of divine consolation in your situation. At a time when you most need God's soothing nearness and guidance, all evidence points to his absence, his silence. All of the Bible's promises seem insincere, meaningless, false, and even mocking.

Maybe you feel like you've lost all hope. Dr. Lewis Smedes, a Fuller Theological Seminary professor, writes in his tender, uplifting book *Keeping Hope Alive*, "Hope can be struck by lightning, but it can also die from repeated slaps of disappointment. Hope hangs on too long sometimes, gets too tired to go on, and has nothing to do but collapse from relentless letdown."⁸

Enduring one disappointment after another, and experiencing too many shattered hopes, can devastate your faith. You can find yourself questioning the whole meaning of life and what you believed about God's character, even his existence.

Indeed, I've met quite a number of men and women who've faced such unbearable life tragedies; such unrelenting, undeserving pain; and such hypocrisy in churches that they've lost all confidence in God's existence.

William Lobdell, a once-dedicated Christian, was a religion reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper. As an on-fire believer, he specifically asked for the job of covering religious activities. For several years, he covered all sorts of events that revolved around his Christian faith.

But, during this time, Lobdell observed so much religious fraud, sexual misconduct among clergy, and unexplainable life tragedies that it finally eroded his own faith. His July 7, 2007, *Los Angeles Times* article “Religion Beat Became a Test of Faith” chronicled his “spiritual journey from devout Christian to reluctant atheist.”

The article generated thousands of emails, letters, and calls. It hit a sensitive nerve, probably because there is such reluctance by religious people to talk openly and honestly about their doubts, about why a loving God could permit such heartaches as immoral or unethical clergy, religious leaders who were active pedophiles, poverty, cancer, and wars.

I certainly admire Lobdell’s courageous integrity and I resonate with his struggling. Can you relate to his experiences?

CHRISTIAN SUFFERING CAN MAKE YOU FEEL ABANDONED AND BETRAYED BY GOD

A faith catastrophe is often triggered by an overwhelming sense of God’s abandonment or betrayal. In order to avoid any misunderstandings, let’s see how *Webster’s New World College Dictionary* defines two key words:

Abandon: To give up (something) completely or forever; to leave; forsake; desert

Betray: To hand over; to break faith with; fail to meet the hopes of; to lead astray⁹

To feel abandoned by God is to sense that you’re absolutely cut off from him, with no divine intervention, no comforting presence. You get no soothing reassurance from normal spiritual sources like prayer, Bible reading, or fellowship with other believers. It’s a time of utter solitude in the universe.

Many Christians, including myself, lean on God’s assurance: “*Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.*”¹⁰ For many devout people, just the suggestion that God might leave us is offensive. To some believers, the thought of God’s total absence from their life is a painful, unspeakable notion. Yet, over forty times, the Scriptures mention

God's seeming unavailability, and it encourages us to wait for him until he returns.

As bad as it is to feel abandoned, the sense that God has betrayed you is even worse. Betrayal is a breach of trust—it includes acts of lying, deceiving, double-crossing, cheating, gossiping, undermining, stealing, and other actions.

A lot of Christians experience frequent validation that they are doing the right thing, taking obedient steps of faith. Then, as they are trying to follow what they believe is God's unmistakable guidance, their aspirations collapse. They are shocked, disillusioned! It seems to them that God has pulled the rug out from under their feet, that they've been strung along under deceitful reassurances, false pretenses. They sense that God has not only left them, but also set them up for failure.

Feeling abandoned and betrayed by God is a living hell. God appears to be indifferent, remote, and cruel. It's a helpless, pain-filled, fearful, and angry existence that often spirals into despair. You are left with no explanations of God's purposes, no awareness of his presence, and no affirmation, support, or guidance from him. Your faith is crushed, and you feel as though you are left totally alone to fend for yourself in a haphazard, callous, unforgiving world.

BIBLE HEROES WHO FELT ABANDONED OR BETRAYED BY GOD

When you're going through the agonizing loneliness of a faith meltdown, it's strangely comforting to know that others have gone through similar experiences. Many Bible heroes endured—and overcame—lengthy faith collapses.

King David writhed with a sense of God's abandonment, and David's words often reflected his mixed feelings about God.

At one spiritual high point, David wrote, "*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble*"¹¹ and, "*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*"¹²

Yet even after writing those strong words of faith, there were times when he was absolutely convinced God had abandoned him. David lamented God's silence: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

*Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?”*¹³ And he wondered, *“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? . . . Return to us, O God Almighty!”*¹⁴

Job also ached when he felt deserted and deceived by God. As strong as Job’s faith was, when he suffered loss after loss, he yelled out to God: *“Why do you stay hidden and silent? Why treat me like I’m your enemy?”*¹⁵

Having lost everything dear to him, Job bemoaned: *“Therefore I will not keep silent; I will speak out of the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.”*¹⁶ He lamented, *“As water wears away stones and torrents wash away the soil, so you destroy a man’s hope.”*¹⁷

Job persistently complained about his treatment by God: *“God threw a barricade across my path—I’m stymied; he turned out all the lights—I’m stuck in the dark . . . He tore me apart piece by piece—I’m ruined! Then he yanked out hope by the roots. He’s angry with me—oh, how he’s angry! He treats me like his worst enemy.”*¹⁸

Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah cried out, *“You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived.”*¹⁹ He lamented God’s betrayal:

*He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light. Indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long . . . He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship . . . Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer . . . I have been deprived of peace . . . My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped for from the Lord.*²⁰

You may relate to the cries of Gideon: *“If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about? . . . But now the Lord has abandoned us.”*²¹

The Old Testament widow Naomi felt betrayed by God. She groaned, *“Don’t call me Naomi [pleasant]; call me Mara [bitter], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.”*²²

Even our Savior, Jesus, knew the brutal loneliness of being abandoned by his Father when he cried out from the cross, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”²³ Jesus also knew what it was like to feel betrayed, telling his disciples, “*The Son of Man is about to be betrayed to some people who want nothing to do with God.*”²⁴

POINTS TO PONDER:

- Do you ever feel that life has dealt you a raw deal—or far too many?
- How has your understanding of the Christian life been affected by life’s unfairness?
- Can you identify with people who’ve felt a sense of abandonment or betrayal by God?

SUGGESTED ACTION STEP:

Write a paragraph or two about your abandonment-betrayal battle, describing what happened and how you feel about it.

CHAPTER 2

MY OWN CRISIS OF FAITH

*All my plans are smashed, all my
hopes are snuffed out.*

Job 17:11, The Message

AS A CHILD, I LOVED PLAYING ON THE TEETER-TOTTER AT OUR LOCAL park. A friend would sit on one end of the board and I'd sit on the other, and we'd bounce each other up and down. Sometimes when I was the one who was down, I would stay there, leaving my friend stuck up in the air, screaming to be let down. Then I'd pull a mean trick: while he was still in the air, I'd jump off the teeter-totter and he'd crash to the ground.

There have been times when I felt God has done that to me. I looked to him to be with me through the ups and downs of life, but when a plan, project, or relationship fell apart, it felt like he had cruelly left me hanging just so he could watch me fall.

MY FAITH CRISIS TRIGGER

In my lifetime, I've fought through several major spiritual battles, but the torments of a faith ordeal in 2007 shook me to the core. That year, I firmly believed God had directed me to several great opportunities, but the most important one was writing and publishing a second book on bipolar disorder.

At first, several important doors were opened: I'd obtained a gifted literary agent, my coauthor psychiatrist eagerly agreed to write two

chapters, and a well-known publisher offered us a contract that included a nice signing bonus.

I was excited and fully committed to my book project. I spent several hundred hours researching books and periodicals. I scoured the Internet for the latest information, and I interviewed individuals, family members, and mental health professionals.

Not only had I done my research, I'd also covered the more practical bases: I'd bought more than \$5,000 of office equipment, including a new computer, printer, and other gear, as well as purchased relevant books, magazines, and journals.

I discussed the project with dozens of experts. All feedback was positive. To my mind, all lights were green.

In the beginning, my well-prayed-for, well-prepared plans went smoothly. I consulted almost daily with God, the Bible, and friends. Every step of the way, it seemed God had affirmed the details of my efforts. This opportunity seemed like a spiritual slam dunk.

Then my dreams for fun and success suddenly disintegrated. Six months into dealing with my senior editor, the publishing speed bumps became too frequent to ignore, too stressful to handle. With chapter deadlines to meet, I needed quick feedback to proceed, and my editor didn't respond to emails and phone calls for weeks at a time.

The final straw was when we finally connected and the editor insisted that I change a significant part of the book. My heart sank, my knees buckled, and my stomach retched. I agonized, "This change is contrary to the original proposal and undermines my vision for the book. If the editor is making a major kind of alteration this early in the game after only five chapters, how many more substantive alterations will be demanded?"

A few days later, I pulled the plug on the book venture and ended my relationship with the publishing company.

MY SPIRITUAL ANGUISH BEGINS

The collapse of the book deal hit me hard. I sank, anchored to my office chair, too stunned to move or make decisions. My body was immobilized, but my mind flew, flashing instant replays of all the undeserved

hurts I was going through. I'd experienced far worse faith-shredding obstacles over the years, but for some reason, this latest one really got to me, ripping open old, inner gashes. Inwardly, I screamed:

God, I thought you wanted me to undertake this project for you. Did I misread my circumstances as signs from you? Why did you take me this far only to totally shut me down? I've invested so much time, money, and energy on this opportunity. Why, after so many opened doors, when I was so close to finishing your task, did you pull the plug on me? Why have you withdrawn your comforting peace, God? Where's your consoling presence, your guidance, now, Lord?

But no miraculous changes came my way. God sent no warm affirmations of any kind to assure me of his presence. Feeling helpless, I shouted at him:

How could you have let all these terrible things happen? Why haven't you stepped in to change things and rescue me? Have I just imagined that you've been leading me into these situations? Have I been misunderstanding *my* wishes for being *your* will? Are you punishing me? God, if you are really here, if you care, please help me rebuild and go on.

SPIRITUAL ABANDONMENT

All my prayers to God for help and guidance were met with utter silence. As a result, my inward hell stretched way beyond its initial jolt and continued relentlessly.

For two years after the book deal, my life seemed to be made up of senseless letdowns, totally without any sign of God's presence, purpose, or caring.

All signs led me to believe that God had left me, and I felt like the Israelite living in Babylonian captivity who complained: "*God has lost track of me. He doesn't care what happens to me.*"¹

I'd caught a closer glimpse of what the prophet Isaiah must have felt

when he braced himself in the midst of God's hiddenness, groaning, "*Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself.*"² And I can relate to the pain he felt when, in an even deeper state of despair, he thought to himself, "*I don't get it. God has left me. My Master has forgotten I even exist.*"³

I was fully convinced that God had permanently walked out on me, leaving me to wander alone in complete darkness. Having lost the awareness of his soothing presence, and left alone without any direction to survive, my mental battles were almost unbearable. These invisible, internal wounds gnawed at me day and night. In my confusion, I moaned:

How long will this exile from God last? Why is God so silent? Why won't he show himself? Why can't he at least give me an explanation for all these recent painful events? Why can't he give me even a small sign that will let me know he's still on my side, that he still cares for me, that all these terrible things will somehow turn out for my good and his glory?

In his book *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis wrote about his wife's death from cancer, describing the awfulness of God's absence:

Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing him, if you turn to him with praise, you will be welcomed with open arms. But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.⁴

Oh, how I craved for God to say to me what he said to the prophet Isaiah:

For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on

you . . . though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed. ⁵

Want to be encouraged by a terrific song, inspired by the above words from the prophet Isaiah? Listen to a **free** recording of “For the Mountains Shall Depart” by soloist Drinda Frenzel.⁶ To hear this moving music, please visit: www.drjimstout.com/audio.

The prophet Jeremiah, speaking on behalf of God, promised to the Jewish exiles abandoned in Babylonia, “*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you.*”⁷ Time after time, I pleaded, demanded, even begged, for God to come back, to reveal himself to me. But he seemed to pay no attention to my plight—no divine intervention, no rescue. It was as though he’d left me treading water on an ink-black night, unable to see land and too tired to continue swimming. All I could do was keep repeating my hollow-sounding prayers for help, and hope that he’d return to me an awareness of his personal guidance in my life.

A BETRAYAL THAT STINGS

As bad as God’s abandonment felt, the belief that I’d been betrayed by God hurt *far worse*. His apparent duplicity stung my mind, numbed my soul, and frayed my emotions. Just beneath the surface of my normally calm, jovial persona, I bubbled with anger, distress, confusion, cynicism, guilt, and self-questioning. I was like a boiling cauldron ready to erupt.

I agonized:

Were all those open doors just smoke-and-mirror ploys by God? Was he deliberately seducing me by opening all them

just to trick me by locking this last major one? Maybe all the openings I walked through weren't really God-opened doors after all. Perhaps my own agenda, my own wishes, forced doors to open that God had really closed.

Inwardly, I railed:

God, why have you let so many things sour on me over the past six months? Time and again, I received what I believed were clear-cut validations from you. I've done all kinds of due diligence. I've scrutinized my decisions thoroughly. I've discussed and received positive feedback on this book project with plenty of knowledgeable people. And I checked in repeatedly with you through prayer and reading my Bible.

I was doing my best to obediently trust you. On my own, I would have given up in the face of all these problems, but I've kept fighting precisely because I believed you were not only guiding me, but also encouraging me to continue my efforts. For me, the whole book endeavor has been a step in faith, not an ego trip. All along, I've felt I've been operating under your orders. That's why your betrayal hurts so much.

In my confusion, I questioned God:

Was there some past sin in my life that disqualified me from receiving easy-to-understand signals from you? Was it your intent to punish me by providing me with a publisher, a literary agent, and a respected co-author just so you could then cruelly humiliate me with a series of troubles that finally forced me to cancel the contract?

I wondered, sometimes in silence, sometimes out loud:

Why is God so unconcerned with my well-being? One major hurt is bad enough, but so many in a row has become intolerable.

All along, I've been trying to do his will. Things aren't supposed to happen this way."

My mind ruminated on Job's complaints:

*What did I do to deserve this? . . . Haven't I wept for those who live a hard life, been heartsick over the lot of the poor? But where did it get me? I expected good, but evil showed up. I looked for light but darkness fell. My stomach's in a constant churning, never settles down!*⁸

Indeed, God had become an acute disappointment to me. I sincerely thought I knew his will for my projects. I did my best to obey what I believed to be his guidance, but everything backfired on me. And I resented his actions—or inactions. I simmered in self-pity and rage. I thought God had strung me along and arranged my plans to fail so he could watch me fall apart.

POINTS TO PONDER:

- Does reading my trauma trigger any memories of similar past upsets?
- Do you ever feel like God has slammed the door on you despite all your good intentions? How does it feel? What thoughts run through your mind?
- Are you being ruthlessly honest with God about your anger and hurt? Are you telling him your doubts about him and his lack of intervention in your problem?

SUGGESTED ACTION STEP:

Tell God that his silence is disturbing you. Ask him to communicate with you in some way through a person, movie, book, song, the Bible, or some other way.