

If you've ever doubted God or wondered whether he was with you in the midst of your hardest moments, *Hope in the Dark* is the biblical encouragement your heart desperately needs.

—**Lysa TerKeurst**, *New York Times* bestselling author; president, Proverbs 31 Ministries

If you're searching for hope, the first step is to look for it in the right places. Craig Groeschel's new book, *Hope in the Dark*, not only shows you where to look but will remind you that you're never really alone—even in the dark.

—**Steven Furtick**, pastor, Elevation Church;
New York Times bestselling author

With mercy, empathy, and deeply rooted faith, Craig Groeschel masterfully touches our hearts by answering Jesus' unending invitation to be honest and ask our toughest questions. Then, courageously addressing the unexplainable pain we experience when tragedy befalls us and life seems so unfair, Craig walks us through the process of falling back into the arms of Jesus, trusting in God's character once again, and drawing closer to God than we've ever been. He helps us turn our doubts into determination, our fears into faith, and our questions into peace. It's a message ministered so well, you will never forget it.

—**Christine Caine**, bestselling author;
founder, A21 and Propel Women

Pastor Craig's words are prophetic, loving, healing, and deeply moving. Being prepared and equipped with truth for those seasons of darkness and hurt and pain is what makes us able to walk through them and stand on the hope we have in Jesus, and Craig lights that path so we are prepared when that time comes. There's no better reminder than the one in this book—that God is good and he always meets us in our hurt.

—**Jefferson Bethke**, author, *New York Times* bestselling *Jesus > Religion*

Hope in the Dark

Also by Craig Groeschel

Altar Ego: Becoming Who God Says You Are

*Chazown: Define Your Vision, Pursue Your
Passion, Live Your Life on Purpose*

*The Christian Atheist: Believing in God
but Living as If He Doesn't Exist*

*Dare to Drop the Pose (previously
titled Confessions of a Pastor)*

Daily Power: 365 Days of Fuel for Your Soul

*Divine Direction: Seven Decisions
That Will Change Your Life*

Fight: Winning the Battles That Matter Most

*From This Day Forward: Five Commitments to Fail-
Proof Your Marriage (with Amy Groeschel)*

It: How Churches and Leaders Can Get It and Keep It

*Liking Jesus: Intimacy and Contentment in a Selfie-
Centered World (previously titled #Struggles)*

*Love, Sex, and Happily Ever After
(previously titled Going All the Way)*

Soul Detox: Clean Living in a Contaminated World

Weird: Because Normal Isn't Working

What Is God Really Like? (general editor)

Hope in the Dark

Believing God Is Good
When Life Is Not

Craig Groeschel

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



ZONDERVAN

Hope in the Dark

Copyright © 2018 by Craig Groeschel

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

ISBN 978-0-310-34882-5 (audio)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Groeschel, Craig, author.

Title: *Hope in the dark* : believing God is good when life is not / Craig Groeschel.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Zondervan, [2018]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018002653 | ISBN 9780310342953 (hardcover) | ISBN

9780310343110 (international trade paper edition) | ISBN 9789310342960 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Despair--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Distress (Psychology)

| Hope--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Christian life.

Classification: LCC BT774.5 .G76 2018 | DDC 248.8/6--dc23 LC record available at

<https://lccn.loc.gov/2018002653>

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.Zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the King James Version. Public domain.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation. © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked TLB are taken from The Living Bible. Copyright © 1971 by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Craig Groeschel is represented by Thomas J. Winters of Winters & King, Inc., Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Cover design: Micah Kandros

Interior design: Kait Lamphere

First printing April 2018 / Printed in the United States of America

Contents

<i>A Letter to the Reader</i>	9
-------------------------------------	---

Introduction: When You Want to Trust, but Life Won't Let You	13
---	----

Part 1: Hide and Seek

1.1: Where Are You, God?	27
1.2: Why Don't You Care?	37
1.3: Why Aren't You Doing Something?	43
1.4: It Seems Unfair	49
1.5: Crisis of Belief	55

Part 2: Lost and Found

2.1: Listen	69
2.2: Write	83
2.3: Wait	93
2.4: By Faith	99
2.5: "Faith Tested"	107

Part 3: Hope and Glory

3.1: Remember.....	117
3.2: Accept.....	127
3.3: Trust	133
3.4: Hope	139
3.5: Believe.....	145
Conclusion: When You Question <i>and</i> Believe	153
 <i>Questions for Reflection</i>	 159
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	173

A Letter to the Reader

Adrianne Manning is like family to me. She's the most outgoing, gregarious, bubbly, and fun person I know. She has served in my office for many years now, and I love her and her family deeply.

One day years ago, she bounced into my office, beaming with excitement. Part dancing, part shouting, she could barely get the words out. She and her husband, Danny, were expecting. It was an answer to our prayers.

We hugged.

We cried.

And hugged again.

But when she lost her baby, we did the exact same thing. Only the emotions were so much different and deeper.

We hugged.

We cried.

And hugged again.

As a pastor, I see so much loss. It's never easy, especially when it affects someone very close to you. And we did what most everyone does. We asked God, "Why? Why did you allow this to happen?"

Hope in the Dark

And that's when I started writing this book. I wrote. Wrote. And wrote some more. And I didn't tell anyone I was writing. Not my publisher. Not other staff members. Not my friends. I just wrote. With every word, I had Adrianne in mind. And not just Adrianne but everyone I knew who was going through hell on earth and didn't understand why.

If you've read any of my other books, you might notice that this one has a very different tone. I often use humor in my writing because life is so serious. I believe God loves it when we laugh. But you might notice I don't use much, if any, humor in this book. That's because, honestly, my mood was much different when I wrote it. I wanted to wade into some of the deeper issues we grapple with in life and face some of the questions we often don't like to talk about.

After I finished the first draft of the manuscript, I gave it to Adrianne to read. I explained that it was for her. She took the manuscript home and read the whole thing in one sitting. The next day, when she walked into the office, she didn't speak. Instead . . .

We hugged.

We cried.

And then we hugged again.

It was a long time before we talked about the loss of her child. And it was even longer before I told anyone about this manuscript. For years, it sat silently on my computer, stored in an obscure file, mostly forgotten. Then, years later—when I received some bad news about my daughter's health—I decided to pull out that manuscript and look at it again, this time for

A Letter to the Reader

myself. Oddly, the words I had written for Adrienne helped soothe my own soul.

After praying about it, I decided to show the manuscript to my publisher. Their editors felt the depth of my emotion in the words on the pages, and they believed that this message might be helpful to others.

So I dove back into the manuscript. I updated it some, expanded it. This book is the result.

Just to be clear: this book is not for everyone. If you're living the dream and you're on a spiritual high, stop and praise God for his goodness. I celebrate with you. But, honestly, this book probably isn't for you, at least not in this season of your life. This book is for those who are hurting. For those with doubts. For those afraid that their faith may be failing. For those whose world has grown dark.

On the other hand, if life is closing in on you, if your faith feels stretched to the breaking point, then this book is for you. As you read it, I hope you'll have the courage to enter with me into some of the pain of this world. I hope you will understand why I wrote this with a more serious and reflective tone. I hope you will venture out to the edges with me and wrestle with some of the questions Christians are often afraid to ask. I hope you discover the depths and riches of God's grace that only the valleys of life can reveal.

This book is first for my good friend, Adrienne.

But this book is also for anyone who is hurting and doesn't understand why.

Introduction

When You Want to Trust, but Life Won't Let You

I *want* to believe God cares about me; I really do,” she told me, wiping tears from under her darkened, bloodshot eyes. Under the harsh fluorescent lights of the hospital corridor, Marci barely resembled the vibrant girl I remembered, that kid I’d watched grow up in our youth group at church. When she was a teenager, Marci was outgoing, fun-loving, and full of life, even as she was growing more and more serious about her faith, coming early to youth group and staying late. No one loved to worship and talk about God more than Marci.

Then, in her early twenties, Marci met Mark, a great Christian guy with a charismatic personality. They fell in love practically overnight, marrying almost a year to the day after they met. Mark’s dynamic personality served him well, helping him land a great sales job. Before long, he was making more money than most other professionals his age. They bought their dream home, and as Mark and Marci served God together at our church, they just knew life couldn’t get any better.

Hope in the Dark

But then it did.

After just two months of trying, they learned they were pregnant with their first child. When beautiful little Chloe was born, my wife, Amy, and I joined Mark and Marci at the hospital to thank God for his blessings. Celebrating with them was amazing, all of us thanking God for this wonderful family that he was growing in his presence.

Back then, none of us could see even a hint of cracks around the foundation of their lives. But as the years ticked by, Mark's job had him working longer and longer hours and required ever more frequent travel. Even so, when he came home one day and informed Marci that he was leaving her—for one of her closest friends—she never saw it coming. Devastated, Marci found herself battling on two fronts, coping on the one hand with Mark's betrayal and struggling on the other as a single mom trying to build a new life for herself and Chloe. She took small comfort in thinking that at least things couldn't get any worse.

Until they did.

Chloe, by then in fifth grade, started rapidly losing weight and feeling tired all the time. When the headaches and dizzy spells began, a series of tests revealed the unthinkable—cancer. In just a few short months, Chloe shriveled from being a healthy, popular girl at school into a pale, bedridden patient on a ventilator. Cancer mercilessly ravaged her already weakened body. Chemo didn't even make a dent. Her doctors decided to shift their focus onto doing all they could to make her last days as comfortable as possible.

Introduction

As I stood there in that bleak hospital hallway, the tireless Marci I had once known was long gone, swallowed up by this weary, defeated woman. She was beyond exhaustion, past depression, dangerously discouraged. She grasped desperately for anything even remotely resembling that bottomless faith that used to come to her so easily. But her unshakeable trust in God was nothing more than a sad memory now. She drew a deep breath, fighting back the sobs. As her forlorn gaze pierced me, it took all the resolve I could muster to remain strong for her.

She sighed. “I *really* want to believe that God is with me right now. I mean, I want to know that he’s good, that he cares. I want that so badly, but . . .” Her voice trailed off. This time there was no stopping the tears.

“But, Craig, when I see my baby girl wasting away in there, in so much pain, how can I surrender to a God who allows this? And on top of everything else that we’ve already been through? I *want* to trust, but I just don’t know how.”

THAT ONE LITTLE PHRASE, “I WANT TO TRUST,” PUT DOWN ROOTS in my own heart. Everywhere I look, I see people who understand exactly how Marci felt in that cold, sterile hospital. So many people want to believe in God’s presence and goodness, but they just have too many unanswered questions. Something in them longs to trust in God—to know him, to feel his presence, to sink into his peace, to believe he’s there for them, helping them carry their burdens. They want to pray and know that

Hope in the Dark

he hears them. They want comfort. They want to know that he's with them, that he'll protect them. Deep down, they hope God is more than just some kind of made-up cosmic figure that gullible people naively trust. They want him to inhabit more than retreaded clichés thrown around by politicians, activists, and Jesus freaks.

I believe there are a lot of people like Marci, people who once believed God took an active interest in their lives, but they're just not so sure anymore. Maybe he exists, maybe he's sovereign, but does he care? It doesn't feel like it to them. I've even been one of those people myself (more about that later). You may be one right now. Do you ever wonder:

"Where was God when I was being abused? Did he care? If he did, why didn't he do something about it?"

"Why can't we have a baby? There are so many unwanted pregnancies, and so many people seem to have kids they abandon or don't take care of. We go to church. We're good people. We've prayed for years. Why won't God give us a child?"

"What happened to my marriage? More than anything, I wanted at least that to be good. We used to love each other so much, but . . . And Lord knows, I tried as hard as I could. I trusted him. I prayed every day. But now all I have is broken pieces. Why did God let this happen to me?"

"Why was my child born with a disability?"

"Why did I get laid off?"

"Why is everyone I know married and I'm still alone?"

"Why can't I seem to get ahead?"

"Why did the cancer come back?"

Introduction

“Why have my kids abandoned the faith?”

Do you want assurance that God is there when you need him most, but for whatever reason, you doubt he is?

You’re not alone. Throughout the Bible, people questioned God’s involvement in their lives. Even Jesus encountered doubters, one of them his own disciple, the original Doubting Thomas. But there’s one exchange in particular that Jesus had with a spiritual doubter that I’d like us to focus on. Just like Marci, he was a parent who struggled as he watched his child suffering:

Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”

“From childhood,” he answered. “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

“If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

—Mark 9:21–24

Can you imagine the pain this dad experienced? Over and over again, he had to stand by helplessly as his son convulsed, wrestling with an evil spirit that had taken possession of him years before. This loving father would have done anything to ease his son’s suffering. But no matter what he tried, his boy still lived in anguish.

Hope in the Dark

As a dad of six children, I don't want to imagine what that must have been like: a powerful evil spirit hurling your child into water like a rag doll or thrashing him into fire. If the father hadn't dutifully protected his son, it's possible that spirit might have already killed him.

It's no wonder this burdened and desperate dad struggled to believe. After trying everything he knew to do, this man said to Jesus the same thing I might have said in his situation: "*If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us*" (v. 22, emphasis mine).

Some Christians might criticize this question. But this dad was at the end of his rope. After doing everything he could think to do, it's possible that he'd finally resigned himself to despair and loss.

He had nowhere else to turn.

Nothing left that he could do.

His hope was gone.

His world was dark.

But then Jesus makes things clear, first by repeating the father's hopelessness in the form of a question—"If you can?"—and then by challenging him: "*Everything is possible* for one who believes" (v. 23, emphasis mine).

Just think about this. Why didn't Jesus say, "Well, as a matter of fact, I *can* help you"? Or why didn't he say, "I'm the Messiah, the Son of God, and my Father in heaven will heal your son"? Both of those things were true. Instead Jesus put the ball back in the dad's court. While turning to the one and only true God and asking for his help is always a good idea, Jesus

Introduction

said that the key was having trust—faith—that “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

The dad’s response is even more striking: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). You hear what he’s saying, don’t you?

I want to believe.

Lord, I want to believe, but I can’t. I’m struggling. *Really* struggling. Help me overcome my unbelief, my doubts.

It’s a kind of paradox. This man whose son has been possessed by an evil spirit, a force that’s commandeered his son’s body and tried to harm him in every way imaginable—for *years*—says, “I *wish* I could believe, but I don’t know how anymore. I’m in such a dark and desperate place, I can’t see how things could change for the better. But I want to. I wish I could. Help me believe again, Lord. Restore my hope.”

Immediately after Jesus has this exchange with the father, he commands the spirit to leave, and the boy convulses as it comes out, then appears to be dead. “But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up” (v. 27). Here’s what moves me personally about the story: The boy wasn’t the only one healed when Jesus drove out the evil spirit. His father was healed too. Because Jesus drove out the hopelessness that had overtaken him. In the man’s sincere request, Jesus could hear the conflicting messages emanating from his battle-scarred heart.

And God still honors this prayer today, if we’ll only allow him to.

How about you? Would you like to see your doubt-ridden heart healed? Wouldn’t you like to rediscover a deep, abiding

Hope in the Dark

assurance in the character, goodness, power, and presence of God? Is that even possible? Could God shine his light of hope into your dark, despairing heart? Could God plant a new seed of faith in your dry soil, that barren wasteland inside you?

Do you want to believe?

SHEDDING THE OLD SKIN OF DOUBT AND DISBELIEF WILL NOT BE easy, especially if your situation's outcome doesn't align with your hopes and expectations. Even though the doctors told Marci's family to prepare for the worst, many of us still believed that God would perform a miracle for her sweet daughter. So we prayed. And we prayed. And we prayed some more. We leveraged social media, seeing what must have been thousands of people—from all over the world—praying that God would heal little Chloe.

Sadly, God didn't do what any of us hoped he would.

Chloe died just three days shy of her eleventh birthday.

And in that moment, what little remained of Marci's fragile faith shattered into a thousand pieces. She shouted. She cried. She sobbed, "Why, God? *Why?* Why would you let this happen to my daughter? Chloe didn't do anything wrong. You should have taken my life, not hers! How can I ever trust a God who would do this to me? How can I believe in a God who would let this happen?"

I didn't pretend to know the whys. I didn't offer pastoral responses. Instead I did what I could do: I prayed *with* Marci and *for* her. I joined together with the multitudes who

Introduction

were already seeking to bring her comfort, to grieve with her, to hold her up.

I have my own hurts, my own losses, my own doubts from time to time, just like you probably do. But I'm still convinced God is with us during our trials, and I want to help restore the faith of people who see their trust in God demolished by that wrecking ball of unbearable circumstances.

It's not easy. I don't have all the answers. But I *can* promise you that I've asked all of those same questions. I've discovered something that I'm praying will become true for you. You can doubt, question, and even struggle in your faith. But instead of finding that the questions distance you from the heart of God, you will discover something else, something much better. Honest questions, sincere doubts, and deep hurts can draw you closer to God than you've ever been before.

THROUGHOUT OUR LIVES, WE ALL REACH POINTS WHERE WE FIND ourselves wrestling with spiritual questions. I knew a man once whose wife of eighteen years was killed by a drunk driver. Sometime after it happened, I was talking with him when he erupted, "If there *is* a God, then there's no way he's good. A good God wouldn't let some drunk idiot kill my wife and let the idiot live! And if God *is* good, then there's no way he's in control of things, or that wouldn't have happened to her! I'm not even sure anymore that God exists. And *if* he does, well, then I don't want to have anything to do with the kind of God that would let something like that happen."

Hope in the Dark

His train of thought was logical. He made some fair points. And the truth is, in the middle of our grief and anger, it's a genuine temptation for us to start seeing God that way. I'd even say that every time we feel pain, our Enemy will try to leverage that to slip a barrier between us and God. But faith isn't about logic. Faith's not a math problem or a language problem or even a philosophy problem; it's a matter of the heart.

I haven't experienced this man's loss. But I ache for him just the same. What's more, I could see that beneath his hurt, he wanted to trust in God. It's just that in that moment, he couldn't reconcile the pain he was feeling with the image of God that he wanted to believe in.

I wrote this book for the many people who are struggling to believe that God cares about them, especially when they find themselves in the middle of a crisis. When you're stumbling through a valley, it's difficult to see the light. You want to believe, but you're having a hard time reconciling the hope-filled message of the Christian faith with what you're seeing around you.

What makes this subject especially personal to me is that my family is living in the middle of an extremely painful trial. Just as the father we read about earlier was hurting for his son, I'm hurting deeply for my second daughter, Mandy. It was only two weeks before Mandy married James that she learned she had infectious mononucleosis, or mono. Even though she eventually overcame this relatively common but uncomfortable disease, her body never fully recovered, and now she struggles with severe physical issues that have baffled the medical experts.

Introduction

At the age of twenty-one, she had to stop working. We've visited more doctors than I can count. And Mandy continues to suffer.

Even as I'm typing these words, we have just booked flights for Mandy and her husband to travel to the Mayo Clinic, hoping doctors there can diagnose what's causing her physical problems. Here are my current questions for God:

Why her? She loves you, God. She always has.

Why, just before her wedding?

Why won't you heal her?

Why can't we at the very least get a diagnosis?

Not only are we overwhelmed with sincere questions, but we face daily fears. If you knew the details of her physical struggles, you would understand why we are praying many times a day that she's not facing something life-threatening.

So as I'm imagining what challenges you might be enduring, you can know that I'm writing from a place of simultaneous pain and hope. Pain in the moment, and hope for the future. But sometimes the pain seems to yell, while hope only whispers. And sometimes it all leads you to doubt whether God sees your pain and responds and cares.

If you are struggling, you may be able to relate to another spiritual doubter from the Bible, an often-overlooked minor prophet with one of the most difficult names to pronounce: Habakkuk. Habakkuk's name speaks to the same kind of paradox, those same conflicted feelings, that we saw when Jesus spoke with the father of the possessed boy, that my friend Marci felt in losing Chloe. Habakkuk means both to wrestle

Hope in the Dark

and to embrace. It's like that kind of hug that wants both to cling to you and to push you away. It's the pain of what you see and feel, and it's the hope that God is still with you. Habakkuk is the kind of heart that wants to believe even as it recoils at the possibility.

If you are struggling, I'm hoping that you are willing to *wrestle*. So many people seem to be seeking a bumper sticker God with whom life is clean, easy, and problem free and answers are clever, even punchy. But life is never clean. It's far from easy. And it's never problem free. That's why I believe putting God into an easy-to-explain box is not only unwise but dangerous. To really know God, you have to wrestle through pain, struggle with honest doubts, and even live with unanswered questions.

So while I won't promise you that God is your copilot or that the Bible says it and that settles it, I will promise you this: if you wrestle with him, seek him, cling to him, God will meet you in your pain.



PART 1

Hide and Seek

1.1

Where Are You, God?

*Human beings do not readily admit desperation.
When they do, the kingdom of heaven draws near.*

—Philip Yancey

Painful trials are fertile ground for the seeds of doubt. But life doesn't have to fall apart for someone to start questioning the presence and goodness of God. My first bout with doubt didn't strike during a difficult time; rather it hit during an otherwise ordinary moment in, of all places, a church.

When I was growing up, my family went to church semi-regularly. Naturally, as a kid I just assumed that's what everybody else's families did too. I also assumed that everything I heard about God was true, just as I knew that two plus two equals four and that the Dallas Cowboys were the best team in the NFL. But then, sitting in church one Sunday morning when I was probably about ten or eleven, a buzzing swarm of questions suddenly descended and began to sting my consciousness: "What if all this stuff I've always believed isn't true?"

Hope in the Dark

What if God isn't real? And if he *is* real, is he involved in our lives—in *my* life? Does he really care?"

I looked all around, trying to see if anyone else was wrestling with the same intrusive thoughts. No one else, or at least no adults, seemed the least bit antsy or uncomfortable. (Later I learned that appearances can be deceiving.) It wasn't that I suddenly stopped believing what our preacher was saying; honestly, I don't even remember what he was saying. But it was clear that the foundation of my young reality had started to crumble.

The more I thought about the questions I was having, the more questions I seemed to have. If God was in control (as he was supposed to be), then why did so many bad things happen? Granted, my own life was pretty good; I had loving parents and plenty to eat and a warm, dry house. But I was old enough to realize that a lot of people didn't have those things. I had friends whose parents had gone through bitter, angry divorces, and friends who had only one parent at home. I knew kids who got so ill that they had to stop coming to school. The headlines on the news began to penetrate my cartoon-addled mind in a way they never had before, awakening me to bad things happening in the world every day: war, murder, poverty, corruption.

And once those doubts crept in, they lingered. It was as if they had managed to find a secret passage into my mind, and I wondered if I could ever get rid of them. For years I warred with a private spiritual dilemma. If you were to ask me, "Are you a Christian?" I would have said, "Of course." Almost

Where Are You, God?

everyone I knew back then would have said the same thing. After all, we weren't Buddhists or Muslims. I claimed to be a Christian, but my life didn't look anything like Christ's. And secretly I wasn't even sure what I really believed about God. If he was real, I assumed, my doubts probably disappointed him—or worse.

It wasn't until college that I truly understood the gospel and what it means to follow Jesus. And for the first time in my life, I started reading the Bible. I was shocked to find that some of the people in the Bible had doubts, just like I did. Thankfully, many of the Bible stories and teachings addressed a bunch of the questions I'd silently wondered about for years. It wasn't as though suddenly I had found a giant flyswatter I could use to bat them all down. It was more like discovering new paths through a familiar forest. I still saw the trees—all of those bad things in the world—but now I also saw a trail leading to the clearing before me. The trees were still all around me, but they no longer stopped me from moving forward.

Until I ran smack into a giant redwood in seminary.

"HERE'S WHAT I THINK OF THIS BOOK!" EXCLAIMED MY NEW Testament professor as he threw the Bible across the classroom in contempt. "It's time you learned the truth about the fairy tales you've been basing your faith on."

You may find that hard to believe, but it's true. While I had some awesome, faith-filled seminary professors, men and women who helped prepare me to be an effective pastor, I had

Hope in the Dark

others who were shockingly hostile not only toward all that I'd been raised to believe but even toward God. Just like life itself, my seminary experience was a rollercoaster ride of faith and doubt, despair and hope.

My decision to go there was amazing enough already.

When I felt God calling me into ministry, I was as surprised as anyone. It's not that I was unwilling; it was simply that as a former wild frat-guy-jock-business-major turned Christian, I didn't exactly fit the stereotype I had in my head of what a pastor should look like. By the grace of God, my pastor invited me to join the church staff to help reach some of the younger people the church was missing. My newlywed wife, Amy, and I felt overwhelmed with excitement, honored to be serving God full-time in our church.

When it became obvious that a seminary degree would be an important step in my development—and necessary for my future—I enrolled while still working full-time. Even though the thought of all that extra work and studying intimidated me, I was excited at the prospect of strengthening my faith and becoming better equipped to fulfill all that I felt God leading me to do.

So imagine my shock when I discovered a jaded, cynical attitude among some of my professors and some of the other students. The way they talked, only someone naive or uneducated could really believe in and accept the Bible literally as God's Word.

Without a doubt, my New Testament professor was the worst offender. He didn't believe that Jesus had said or done

Where Are You, God?

most of what we find recorded in the Gospels. According to this teacher, Paul wrote only a few of the letters that we attribute to him, and John was most likely coming off a bad drug trip when he wrote Revelation.

I was stunned. Devastated. This guy had more degrees than I had tennis trophies. He was brilliant and even revered in certain theological circles. Someone with his credentials *had* to know what he was talking about, right? Suddenly the questions that I'd thought were dead and gone sprang back to life. Could what he said be true? Was it possible that the Bible wasn't really the timeless, inspired Word of God? Was God real? What if *none* of it was true? All my previous doubts came flooding back into my mind. As a child, I hadn't told anyone because I was afraid of what they might think. As an adult—and a pastor—I was paralyzed with fear. No one could know. What would they think? Nothing could be worse than a pastor unsure of his faith.

So I struggled uphill with my doubts for a while, painfully aware of the many tall trees blocking my path. Eventually, though, I mustered the courage to open up to two people: my pastor and another professor. These wise and mature mentors didn't criticize me or disparage my questions; they gave me permission to wrestle. Then they helped guide me back to truth. What meant the most to me was when they talked openly about their own faith struggles and explained how God had sustained them through their doubts. Their living example taught me that honestly facing my doubts could strengthen my faith and that God would show himself faithful through the process.

Hope in the Dark

My faith may have been on life support, but it didn't just survive; it grew and strengthened. It was as if God made a path through a forest of doubts.

At least until the next obstacle blocked my way.

IT'S TEMPTING TO THINK THAT MANY OF US WILL REACH A POINT in our lives where we'll be forced to question all that we believe, and then after this struggle we'll never doubt again. The truth, however, is that all of us test our beliefs every day. Every time you make a decision about how to respond to someone who is rude to you, your beliefs are front and center. Every time you feel that ache in your body, a reminder of the emergency surgery you're still paying for two years later, you wonder if you'll recover, not just physically but financially as well.

When your car breaks down on the same day that your spouse overdraws your checking account, you face a dilemma about how you'll respond—and more important, about what the basis for your response will be. When you're reading a news app and scan the “word bites” about impending military action against yet another aggressive country, about the latest victim of a serial killer, or about the death toll in a train accident, you're forced to confront your own beliefs—about human nature, about life, and about God.

The more I've lived life and the more I've sought to know and understand God, the more I'm certain that doubts are essential to our maturity as believers. If we want a stronger faith, then we might be wise to allow our doubts to stand as

Where Are You, God?

we work through them instead of trying to chop them out of the way.

Judging from what I see in Scripture, I'm convinced that God honors those seekers who sincerely look for the truth, just like that boy's father who wanted to believe so badly that he asked God to help him overcome his unbelief (Mark 9:21–24). Maybe you can relate. You are like so many others who want to believe but feel like life has gotten in the way.

More than a third of the Psalms are prayers or songs of people in pain. These inspired poems often articulate our pain for us when we can't find the words.

Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint;
heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.
My soul is in deep anguish.
How long, LORD, how long? . . .
I am worn out from my groaning.
All night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.
My eyes grow weak with sorrow;
they fail because of all my foes.

—Psalm 6:2–3, 6–7

Can you relate to David's pain? He's exhausted. Worn out. Depressed. And alone. He has cried so many tears, he can't cry any more. It's not that he doesn't believe in God; he absolutely does. He is a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). David simply can't understand why the God who has the power to

Hope in the Dark

change his circumstances, the one who elevated him from a simple shepherd boy to the king of a nation, won't do it.

The authors of Job, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Jeremiah all express confusion, doubt, and the pain of unbearable suffering endured by faithful believers. Even Jesus questioned his Father's will in the garden of Gethsemane as he wrestled with accepting what he would have to suffer on the cross. And then, on the cross, he cried out in agony, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

Maybe in some strange way, God allows us to doubt him sometimes. Maybe he knows that's one of the ways for our faith to grow stronger. One of the best ways.

I understand that's a controversial statement, and you may disagree. But what brought me to that place was my own understanding of the Bible. In addition to the passages of Scripture I've just mentioned, there's one more passage that gives us permission to question God, if we're willing to listen to him in return.

More than 2,600 years ago, Habakkuk asked many of the same questions people all over the world are still asking today. And in his grace, God relieved some of Habakkuk's anguish, even as he left other questions unanswered. But on the other side of his doubts, Habakkuk grew into a person with a richer faith, a faith that may not have developed as fully had he not struggled through his doubts.

Think about it. If you understood everything completely and fully, you wouldn't need faith, would you? But without faith, it's impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). Why? Because

Where Are You, God?

faith and trust must emerge from love, not from a business relationship, a transaction, or some situation in which we have no choice.

Are you willing to ask honest questions? To wrestle?

And more important, are you willing to *listen* for God's answer?

1.2

Why Don't You Care?

*I don't know if God exists, but it would be
better for His reputation if He didn't.*

—Jules Renard

Most of our crime shows and suspense films are based on the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. Now, before you think I'm crazy, hear me out. If you've watched any TV or movies in the past few years, then you've likely encountered some so-called antiheroes, people who do bad things even though they have good intentions.

On the big screen, we're no longer surprised when there's corruption in government or law enforcement. That's now a standard plot device. We even cheer when the ways that these antiheroes bend the rules ultimately bring the liars, cheaters, and murderers "to justice."

Why? Because, like them, we're tired of corrupt, immoral, unethical people getting away with their crimes. We're sick of bad guys, whether they're drug dealers bribing their way

Hope in the Dark

out of criminal charges or corporate executives pulling down seven-figure bonuses even as they eliminate thousands of jobs in their companies.

Maybe the reason we like all those superheroes glutting our local Cineplex is because they have the power to defeat villains who have no regard for human life or for playing by the rules. Captain America, Iron Man, and Thor all seem to be doing what we wish God would do sometimes but he doesn't. They don't call them the Avengers for nothing!

INJUSTICE. CORRUPTION. INDIFFERENCE.

These have been problems almost since the beginning of creation. The prophet Habakkuk is not the first to point it out, but he's definitely one of the earliest and most passionate. Under the reign of King Jehoiakim, Habakkuk witnessed corruption, scandal, and violence that would have made the Godfather blush. Even among God's own people, disputes were often settled by revenge. Officials looked the other way while wealthy criminals dropped coins in their palms. Poor people were often falsely accused of and punished for crimes committed by their rich masters. As a result, some began taking matters into their own hands, not unlike the characters we cheer for on TV and in the movies. It was a mess.

It wasn't that different from our culture. Even if you're not dealing with something painful and unfair in your own life right now, you have to admit, it sure seems like what Habakkuk saw all around him still applies to us today.

Why Don't You Care?

How long, LORD, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?
Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?
Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.
Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.

—Habakkuk 1:2–4

I LOVE THE HONESTY IN HABAKKUK'S QUESTIONS: "How long must I cry for help? God, I *know* you can do something about this. Why don't you?" Habakkuk is reminding God that he's supposed to be a just God and yet he's tolerating the worst sort of violence and injustice.

How do you respond when you experience injustice?

Let's say you're certain you've earned a promotion at work, but your boss overlooks you in favor of someone less devoted. It's unfair. You want to quit, but you need the money. You're stuck.

Or you worked your tail into the ground on your final paper for a class. You're certain it's worthy of an A, so you

Hope in the Dark

can't believe your eyes when it comes back a C, dashing your hopes of getting into grad school.

Or you finally get the car you've always wanted, only to be surprised two days later by an eight-inch scratch down the side, courtesy of a lazy, sloppy parker.

MAYBE EXAMPLES LIKE THESE MAKE YOU MAD, BUT THEY'RE JUST things you've learned to accept. They're simply part of life. That's just the way the world works, right? But some other things aren't quite so easy to accept. Things that involve injustice beyond what you ever could have imagined. Deception. Manipulation. Betrayal.

Recently I talked to a friend who had been a faithful pastor for more than two decades. After raising four kids with his wife of almost thirty years, he came home one day to the shock of his life. His wife had decided she didn't want to be married anymore. An old high school flame had contacted her on Facebook. One thing led to another, and she had rekindled her relationship with the man "God had intended for her to marry in the first place."

After she left my friend, the elders at his church started talking. They agreed that in the wake of a scandal like that, he wasn't fit to lead the church. He could resign or be terminated: his "choice."

This poor, battered man sat in my office recounting his losses, and we cried together. He said, "I know God doesn't owe me anything, but now I have nothing. After serving him

Why Don't You Care?

my entire adult life, how could he allow me to end up divorced and unemployed? It's just . . . just so unfair!"

I couldn't disagree.

Where was the God he had served for all those years? Where is God when someone steals from your business, but then, when they get caught, they declare bankruptcy, so you'll never get back the money they took?

Or what do you say to the wife from your small group at church who loses her husband—a loving, devoted, hardworking guy everyone liked—to a heart attack at age thirty-five? Especially when you think about how many arrogant, mean-spirited people you know who remain healthy and continue to live a long life?

Or what about when someone you loved and trusted for years betrays you? Everyone else thinks she's a strong Christian, which baffles you, because you can't understand how a decent person—much less a follower of Christ—would ever spread gossip about you based on what you confided to her as a prayer request.

Maybe you've tasted the bitterness of injustice firsthand. You did everything you could to raise your kids with love, gentle discipline, and the best you could provide, and yet they've crushed your heart. Even after you've given them your all, now they're addicted to drugs, stealing money from your dresser to get their next fix. All around you, your friends' children seem happy and successful, young professionals graduating from college, getting good jobs, going to church, getting married.

Hope in the Dark

Perhaps you've poured everything you can into your marriage, only to experience a betrayal so unexpected that it feels especially cruel. You thought you knew your spouse, but now . . . this? After all you've been through together, someone at work just had more to offer them? Seriously?

You're devastated, broken, and alone. It doesn't matter what the circumstances are. Sooner or later, we all experience the cruel blows of life. We get kicked in the gut or sucker punched on the chin. Our souls are left to bleed out on the floor.

Sure, you pray. You try to forgive. You read your Bible. You lean on the strong shoulders of your Christian friends and family. You pray some more.

But things only seem to get worse. Life's punches become relentless, one right after another. Your heart becomes battered and bruised, your soul scarred and scabbed with disappointment and sadness. You're numb with rage, paralyzed with grief.

You wonder, "Doesn't God care about what happens to me? Is he just going to let me drown in all these bad things? He's God, so surely he's powerful enough to do something, to change things. Why doesn't he?"

Habakkuk asked these same questions thousands of years ago.

1.3

Why Aren't You Doing Something?

Seeing so much poverty everywhere makes me think that God is not rich. He gives the appearance of it, but I suspect some financial difficulties.

—Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*

If only life were like a sitcom.

When I was growing up, there wasn't so much graphic violence and corruption on TV—all those antiheroes we were just talking about. And that's probably just as well, because I imagine my parents wouldn't have let me watch those shows anyway. So I grew up on a steady diet of classic sitcoms: *The Brady Bunch*, *Happy Days*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and the scandalously sexy *Three's Company*.

The formulas were so predictable yet so satisfying. Familiar characters experienced an unexpected problem that provided ample one-liners and silly slapstick situations. Then right before

Hope in the Dark

the end, the Fonz or Sheriff Taylor or Alice the housekeeper or Janet and Jack solved the problem, and everything was great again, all in under thirty minutes—and actually, even less than that when you factor in commercial breaks! While I knew this wasn't the way the real world worked, it was hard not to start wishing that life followed a similar script.

At some point, we all notice that the sharp corners of reality have little in common with all those smooth, glossy surfaces of life on television. Maybe it starts at a young age with fairy tales and Disney movies, most of which end pretty well. But when you're being chased not by the Big Bad Wolf but by a whole pack of ravenous wolves with names like Cancer and Bankruptcy and Addiction and Divorce, it's hard to believe in happily ever after.

When you're hit by a drunk driver and you need half a dozen surgeries on your spine just so you can walk again, who would have thought you'd end up addicted to prescription painkillers?

When you slept around some and had that abortion before you became a Christian and then later fell in love with the man who would become your husband, who would ever have imagined that now you wouldn't be able to get pregnant?

When you begged God for a child and he gave you one, who knew that you would lose your spouse to cancer and find yourself working three jobs as a single parent?

When you had a few drinks—far less than everyone else at that party—who would have thought that you'd be the one to end up with a DUI that keeps throwing up roadblocks in your career?

Why Aren't You Doing Something?

Your life doesn't usually play out in the way you would write your own story. As you're dealing with life's unfairness, even if your mind *is* able to come up with all kinds of resourceful solutions, the tricky part is having the power to do any of those things.

IF YOU WERE GOD, YOU WOULD KNOW HOW THE LATEST EPISODE of your sitcom life should wrap up. You recover from surgery and run your first marathon. You get accepted to your favorite college with a full scholarship. You and your husband pray together through the ordeal of infertility and fall more in love with each other than ever, then adopt a beautiful little girl. You struggle to survive without your spouse, until you meet that amazing, single, gorgeous, godly millionaire in small group at your church.

Of course, if you had the power, you might not *just* provide the happy endings. Maybe you'd go even farther: you'd also punish all those selfish, arrogant, mean-spirited people who seem to get away with murder (literally and figuratively). The drug lords who prey on the most vulnerable, hooking them on a sweet poison that will inevitably kill them. The villains who abuse children and swindle senior citizens. The cheaters in power who rig the system to take advantage of the poor. The monsters who rape women to make themselves feel like men and feed their own desires. The women who manipulate men to get what they want.

If you were God, maybe you'd see to it that these evil people

Hope in the Dark

were held accountable. You'd make sure they experienced the same measure of pain, loss, and injury that they've caused. That they suffered at *least* as much as their victims.

But as much as we think we know, the reality is this: we're not God, and we don't know best.

Often when we want God to do something, the solution wouldn't require much of him. A quick nod. A spoken word. An answered prayer. In the grand scheme of things, just a small miracle. If only he would allow me to be rewarded for all my hard work! Or just heal my sick child! Or help my loved one overcome depression! Or break my sexual addiction! Or bring my prodigal child back home! Or at least let me win the lottery!

As we grow to trust God, we have to recognize what I consider to be some of the fundamentals of growing in the Christian faith: Awe. Respect. Reverence. Appreciation for God being God. Acceptance of our limitations as human beings. We can't know everything or see into other people's hearts. We can't know all that has come before in the history of the world. And we sure can't see ahead to how it will all unfold.

But God can.

Like a master storyteller, he is crafting an epic in which he allows each of us to play a significant role. There are no minor characters or bit players in God's story. We're all important. He'll never abandon us, and he's working everything for our good.

So when we're suffering, ranting and raving about all the unfairness of life, we would do well also to remember that there's so much more going on than we can see or understand

Why Aren't You Doing Something?

from our limited perspective. We're seeing only a tiny sliver of a much bigger story, perhaps only one sentence or one paragraph on just a single page.

"GOD, WHY AREN'T YOU DOING SOMETHING?" MIGHT BE THE question that cuts to the heart of our innermost doubts. Basically, we're asking God to reconcile what we believe with what we see in front of us. It's as if the laws of nature that we *thought* were true—you know, things like gravity—suddenly go away. When we suffer at this level, we seem to see apples falling off trees and floating up into the sky.

When our beliefs about God's power, goodness, love, and generosity clash with the awful events that occur in this world, we feel just as untethered as those weightless apples. How does a good God allow terrorists to crash planes into skyscrapers? Or gunmen to massacre students in their schools or viewers in a movie theater? What kind of all-powerful God—I mean, come on—would allow children to be born with AIDS and leukemia and all kinds of other debilitating diseases?

When our eyes witness such heart-wrenching scenes, how can our souls believe that God cares about us?

God understands your pain. And what's more, he invites your questions. He would rather have you yell and scream at him than abandon your relationship with him in icy silence. Feel free to pour out your heart to him, as David did in Psalm 56:8: "Record my misery; list my tears on your scroll—are they not in your record?" God welcomes your anguish and even

Hope in the Dark

your anger, but you don't have to stop there. After you've laid bare your hurts and your questions—after you've exhausted yourself pounding against his chest—then listen.

Open your hurting heart to him, and he will speak. Because even though God is almighty and all-powerful and rules over his kingdom, he also cares deeply about you. He loves you, and he will never abandon you. In fact, it's usually at your deepest time of need that he meets you, comforts you, and lifts you into a place where healing can finally begin. But only if you're willing to listen.