

An Inconvenient Loss of Faith



a theological novel by
MARTIN THIELEN

Copyright © 2021 Martin Thielen

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are from The New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers.



Cover art: *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* by Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri): oil on canvas, 1621. Used with permission.

DEDICATION

To doubters everywhere who resonate with the words of scripture,
“Lord I believe; help my unbelief!”

Contents

Part One: Searching for Graceland

1. Weeping at the Divine Grave
2. Ambushed
3. Necessary Ending
4. Possible Opportunity
5. Hardheaded Woman
6. Worth the Wait
7. First Sunday
8. School Days
9. Unexpected Call
10. Three Questions
11. Private Loss
12. Honeymoon
13. Worst-Kept Secret
14. Pickup Chapel Service
15. Haunting Question
16. Welcome Back
17. Bad Religion
18. Professor for a Day
19. Happy Anniversary
20. Hard Request
21. Fred's BBQ
22. Three Options
23. Bend or Break?
24. First Stone
25. Meeting God at the Movies

Part Two: Losing My Religion

- 26. Uncomfortable Visit
- 27. Caves and Canoes
- 28. Week from Hell
- 29. God on the Gallows
- 30. The Death of Providence
- 31. Hell House
- 32. The Scale
- 33. Christmas Truce
- 34. Weekend in Atlanta
- 35. "But Some Doubted"
- 36. Favorite Verse
- 37. Ten Percent Christian
- 38. The Rocking Horse
- 39. September 11, 2001
- 40. Final Blow

Part Three: With a Little Help from My Friends

- 41. Moving Day
- 42. Descent
- 43. It's Called Grief
- 44. Let the Healing Begin
- 45. Back in the Saddle
- 46. Job Offer
- 47. Blest Be the Tie
- 48. Deconstruction
- 49. Reconstruction
- 50. Pick the Fruit and Burn the Rest
- 51. Unexpected Invitation
- 52. Guest Preacher

Preface

Thank you for your interest in *An Inconvenient Loss of Faith: A Theological Novel*. Before you begin reading the story, I'd like to make several comments.

First, if you feel secure and comfortable with traditional faith and church, especially conservative evangelicalism, this novel will not be helpful to you. Instead, it will likely prove troubling. However, if you struggle with traditional beliefs and/or institutional religion, I created this story about Reverend Paul Graham for people just like you.

Second, Paul Graham's unorthodox faith journey is certainly not the only way to resolve religious struggles in the twenty-first century. Nor is it necessarily the best way. It's just the way I decided to construct this particular narrative. My hope is that Paul's story will serve as an engaging and helpful vehicle for you as you attempt to navigate faith in the modern era.

Finally, before you begin the novel, I recommend that you read the author interview. It provides important background information that will help facilitate your understanding of the story. To read the interview, [click here](#).

Martin Thielen
Cookeville, Tennessee
January 2021

Part One

Searching for Graceland

Chapter 1

Weeping at the Divine Grave

On his forty-fourth birthday, after officiating at the funeral of one of his closest friends, Reverend Paul Graham drove home, walked inside, pulled off his clerical collar, and fell into his brown leather recliner. He picked up his journal, then took the Montblanc pen out of his shirt pocket—the pen the congregation recently gave him on his tenth anniversary at the church.

He wrote, *November 8, 2001: For a person in my profession, losing faith is damn inconvenient.*

Although Paul intended to write more, he didn't have the mental or emotional energy, so he set his journal aside. He looked out the window of their southern city parsonage and watched leaves fall from the massive oak tree in the backyard.

A few minutes later he lifted his tall, lean body out of the recliner and walked to the stereo. He opened up his extensive record collection and pulled out Don McLean's classic, *American Pie*.

Although music was rapidly shifting to CD, Paul still preferred the sound and ritual of vinyl. He carefully laid the album on the turntable and turned it on.

He placed the needle on the feature song, sat back down in his recliner, and listened to McLean's words of disillusionment from three decades earlier, when Paul was just a teenager. Near the end of the song, Paul quietly sang along with Don McLean as he spoke about a sacred store, broken church bells, and God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost skipping town on the "day the music died."

The old familiar tune and lyrics stirred him deeply.

Finally, giving in to the emotions of the day, he began to weep.

Paul's wife Sarah arrived home about 5:00 p.m. A few minutes later their two teenage daughters walked in the door with a large supreme pizza in hand.

Given the sad circumstances, everyone agreed to forego birthday celebrations. However, Sarah did present Paul with his birthday gift, *1*, a greatest-hits compilation by the Beatles.

She went to the trouble of procuring the British vinyl edition. Some clergy liked to collect books. Paul collected records.

During dinner, Sarah and the girls complimented Paul on Sandra's funeral service that afternoon. The four of them spoke a long time about their close family friend. A generous helping of tears and laughter made their way into the conversation. In spite of his melancholy, Paul appreciated the table talk.

Later that night, Sarah told Paul, "I'm going to get ready for bed."

"I'll be there soon," he replied.

A few minutes later, Paul went to the bathroom, looked into the mirror with his blue eyes, and combed his wavy, sandy-colored hair. He willed himself to brush his teeth and wash his face. He then walked into the bedroom and climbed into bed with his wife of twenty-two years.

"So, how are you doing?" she asked.

"Not so well."

"Tell me what you're thinking."

"I'm thinking I've been losing my faith for a decade, the death of ten thousand cuts, and today felt like the final cut."

“I’m so sorry, Paul. I know today’s funeral was brutal.”

“The hardest ever,” he conceded. “But it was just one more log on the raging bonfire of doubt that’s been devouring my faith for years.” Paul paused for a moment. “I’m not sure how much longer I can do this, Sarah.”

“It’s OK. You’ll figure it out.”

“I’ve been trying to figure it out for a long time.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. I’ve talked it to death. It’s time for me to make a decision.”

“If you decide to stay, I’ll support that, as always. But if you need to quit, you can. I have a good teaching position at the university. We have savings. You’re smart and capable and can find another profession that’s a better fit for you. Whatever you decide, we’re going to be fine.”

Paul gently caressed her long brown hair, then her forehead and cheek. He said, “I don’t deserve you, you know.”

“I know,” she replied matter of factly. They both laughed.

Unable to stay awake any longer, Sarah gave him a goodnight kiss, turned off the lamp, and quickly fell asleep.

The clock on her nightstand softly illuminated Sarah’s face as she slept. As he thought about her unwavering love and support in the midst of his faith and vocational crisis, Paul thought, *although I doubt almost everything I once believed, I still believe in you.*

Unable to sleep, Paul slipped out of bed, put on his robe, and went to his study. Although he rarely prayed anymore except professionally, he tried to do so, but the

words wouldn't come.

He put on his reading glasses and opened his top desk drawer. He pulled out a quote that had haunted him since he first came upon it a few months earlier. He wrote it on the back of one of his church business cards. Somehow that felt like the appropriate place to write the quote down, a cruel metaphor of sorts. He read the troubling quote over and over. Each time he did, he felt a piece of his heart and soul rip.

The quotation came from a book called *Conversations at Midnight*, written by the twentieth-century poet Edna St. Vincent Millay: "God is dead and modern men gather nightly around the divine grave to weep."

Paul sat at his desk for a long time, overwhelmed by spiritual and vocational existential angst. He thought about his baptism, seminary training, ordination, and his work as a minister for over twenty years. His eyes filled with tears.

How in the world did it ever come to this?

Finally, Paul wiped the tears from his eyes, replaced the poet's quote into his top desk drawer, and went back to bed. He slept very little that night. At 5:00 a.m., he quietly got up and walked to the kitchen. After brewing a cup of coffee, he stepped into his office and turned on his laptop. For the second time in his ministerial career, he began to write his letter of resignation.

Chapter 2

Ambushed

Ten years earlier, in the spring of 1991, the board of deacons at Trinity Baptist Church gathered for their April meeting. After completing their routine business, deacon chairperson Steven Smith said, “We have one final matter to discuss. Pastor Paul, there’s no easy way to put this. The deacons and I want to talk to you about some concerns we have.”

Feeling broadsided, but keeping a calm exterior in spite of his anxiety, Paul asked, “What concerns are you referring to?”

“Frankly Paul,” replied Steven, “A lot of folks at Trinity feel you have beliefs that are too liberal for our congregation.”

“Can you give me some examples?” asked Paul.

“To begin with, your recent Wednesday night Bible study on modern biblical scholarship. Some of the people who attended that study say you don’t believe in an infallible Bible.”

“That’s a complex issue,” replied Paul. He paused for a moment, attempting to formulate an appropriate response.

Before he could respond, Richard, a longtime deacon at Trinity said, “And we don’t like you preaching on social issues like the environment, race relations, and poverty. We want you to stick to spiritual matters.”

Although Paul wanted to point out that poverty, race relations, and the environment were spiritual issues, for now, he let it pass.

An elderly deacon named Larry added, “And some members don’t think you preach enough about getting saved. They don’t like the fact that you don’t give an altar call

every Sunday.”

Adam pipped in, “And folks are really unhappy about you cramming a woman deacon down our throats.”

Paul felt grateful that Linda, the newly elected female deacon, had not been able to make tonight’s meeting.

Larry added, “In all your years at Trinity, I can’t remember you ever preaching on hell. Nor can I remember a sermon on the atoning blood of Jesus.”

The conversation went on like this for almost an hour. Although Paul did his best to respond nondefensively, given the circumstances, that proved difficult. After listening to their concerns, Paul said, “I’ve been the pastor at Trinity for almost seven years. After all this time, why are these issues only now being raised?”

Steven responded, “That’s a fair question, Paul. An important one. I’ve been mulling that question over since complaints began surfacing several months ago. The truth is, Paul, these concerns have been lurking under the surface since you first arrived. From the beginning of your tenure, people in the congregation sensed that you were far more liberal than our previous pastors. However, given our rapid growth, and how well things were going, most people decided to let sleeping dogs lie. Although I’ve heard grumblings over the years, for the most part, folks just let it ride.”

“So,” Paul demanded, “what has changed?”

“What has changed is your growing condemnation of the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention. Surely you realize that most pastors in our state convention support this movement. So do a lot of our members. Your harsh criticism of what you call ‘the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC’ has raised anxiety among a significant segment of the congregation. One longtime member recently told me, ‘I always suspected that our pastor was in the liberal camp. His position on the SBC controversy has confirmed my suspicions.’”

Steven then added, “Your letter to the editor in the state Baptist newsmagazine a few months ago condemning the conservative movement was the turning point. Since that letter was published, members of the deacon board, myself included, have received numerous complaints. All the concerns about your theology that lay dormant for years have suddenly surfaced. You still have a lot of support, especially among our newer and younger members. But these concerns are growing by the day and putting the church at risk of serious division.”

“So,” Paul asked, “are you here tonight to fire me?”

Steven spoke for the entire group. “Paul, I know this meeting has been exceptionally hard for you. But I want to be clear. In spite of our concerns, not one person in this room tonight is ready to see you fired.

“We all realize you’ve done good work here. Our church has seen significant growth during your tenure. You’ve energized our children and youth ministries. Finances have been excellent.

“You are a good preacher and a capable leader. And there’s no doubt that you love the folks in this congregation. So the answer is no, we are not here to fire you.

“But we are here to make a request. Actually, it’s more than a request. It’s an expectation.

“We want you to preach and teach more traditional doctrines. We want you to stay away from social issues. We want you to give an altar call every week. And most important, we want you to refrain from making any more negative comments about the conservative direction the denomination is taking.

“People are tired of hearing about the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. A lot of folks in our congregation support the conservative movement, and it troubles them to hear their pastor condemn it.”

Paul wasn't sure how to respond. He wanted to resign on the spot, but he had a family to consider.

Finally, he said, "You've given me a lot to think about. I need time to process these concerns. So, how about this? I'll honor your requests for the next two months, and we can pick this conversation back up at our next meeting in June."

"Sounds fair enough to me," replied Steve. "What do the rest of you think?"

Everyone concurred.

After a final closing prayer, Steve adjourned the meeting.

Paul immediately went to his office and made a phone call.

Chapter 3

Necessary Ending

When he got home from the deacons meeting, Paul told Sarah, “As soon as I tuck in the girls, we need to talk.”

Paul went into Hope’s room. “Hi honey, how are you doing?”

“I got 100 on my spelling test today.”

“I’m so proud of you!” Paul exclaimed.

After Hope said her evening prayer, Paul gave her a kiss. “Goodnight honey. I love you.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

Paul then walked into Joy’s room. Although preoccupied with the deacon’s meeting, he asked, “How was school?”

“Ms. Jenkins let me feed the goldfish today.”

“I bet that was fun.”

Paul listened to Joy’s prayer and said goodnight.

“Daddy, aren’t you going to do my ears?”

“I’m sorry honey, I forgot.”

When the girls were still preschoolers, Paul heard about a father’s ritual that he incorporated into his own parenting. A few months earlier, Hope informed him that she was now too big for the nightly ritual. But Joy still adored it.

Paul gently took Joy by the ears, looked her in the eye and said, “I love you. I bless you. And I think you are absolutely terrific.” Then he kissed her on the forehead. Joy giggled and said, “Goodnight Daddy. I think you’re terrific too.”

As he walked out of Joy’s room, Paul thought, *Too bad the deacons don’t agree with you.*

Paul joined Sarah in the den. “I had a horrific deacon’s meeting.”

“I want to hear about all about it.”

Paul told her the bloody details, blow by blow. Over an hour later, when their conversation finally came to an end, Sarah said, “It’s time, Paul.”

Before getting ready for bed, Paul went to his study and sat at his desk. He picked up a document that arrived in the mail a week earlier. It came from a group of conservative pastors in his state convention who strongly supported the fundamentalist movement in the Southern Baptist Convention. They sent it to every SBC pastor and deacon chairperson in the state. They called their statement, “This We Believe.” Although he carefully read the document when it first arrived, Paul looked it over again.

This We Believe

- We believe the Bible is God’s literal, inerrant, and infallible word.
- We believe the theory of evolution is a lie from Satan.
- We believe women must submit to their husbands and cannot serve as pastors.
- We believe hell is a literal place of eternal torment reserved for unbelievers.
- We believe homosexuality is an abomination to God.

Although the statement included seven additional propositions, Paul had read enough. *Sarah is right. It’s time.*

* * *

At 9:00 a.m. the next morning, Paul went to visit his friend Craig Frazier, pastor at First United Church of Christ, the most liberal congregation in town. Craig, a short, thin, balding man in his mid-fifties spoke softly and had a warm smile. Paul thought his round wire-rimmed glasses make him look professorial.

“I appreciate your meeting me on short notice,” Paul said as he walked into Craig’s office.

“Glad to do so. You sounded troubled when you called last night. What’s going on?”

“After discussing it with you in theory on numerous occasions over the past two years, the time has come for me to depart the Southern Baptist Convention and transfer to the United Church of Christ. You already know the reasons.”

“Why now?” asked Craig.

“Here’s one reason.” Paul handed him the “This We Believe” document.

Craig quickly read it over. “How lovely! I think I’ll convert today.”

Paul laughed. “My sentiments exactly. Although it’s not an official denominational statement, it represents the theology of the majority of SBC pastors, both here in this state and across the nation. Clearly, this kind of hard-core fundamentalist thinking is going to drive the theological and political agenda in the SBC for years to come.”

“Unfortunately, you’re probably right,” Craig said. “Given your theological perspective, I can understand how staying in your denomination has become intolerable. What a mess.”

“A mess indeed,” Paul replied. “However, as awful as that theological document is, it’s not the primary reason I asked to see you this morning.”

Paul then told Craig all about the deacons meeting.

Craig listened carefully to Paul's story. Then he asked, "Did the confrontation with your deacons last night surprise you?"

"At first, yes. But only because I felt defensive. Then I realized the deacons were right.

"This theological tension between me and the congregation has been brewing for a long time. But the church was doing well, and my family was happy.

"So everyone, including me, just tiptoed around it. However, deep inside, I've known for years I wasn't a good theological fit for Trinity. But admitting that would have forced me to deal with a much bigger issue I wasn't ready to confront."

"What's that?" asked Craig.

"That I didn't fit in the Baptist church anymore. I probably never did. I read recently that you can't find the right job in the wrong field. Over the past few years, it's become painfully clear that pastoring in the Southern Baptist Convention is the wrong field for me. Last night's meeting was just the final straw."

"Anyway," Paul concluded, "I can't deny the truth anymore. Sarah and I both agree that it's time for me to leave the SBC and join a more progressive denomination. I should have done so several years ago. I'm ready to pull the trigger on this decision."

"I'm sorry about the deacons meeting," Craig said. "That had to hurt. But on the other hand, I'm glad you're ready to make this transition. As I've said numerous times before, I believe the United Church of Christ will be an excellent fit for you."

"As do I," Paul replied. "This isn't just about leaving the SBC. It's also about my strong desire to connect with the UCC. So, what steps do I need to take to make this happen?"

"You have to jump through some ecclesiastical hoops, but you can make the change without too much trouble. Like the Southern Baptist Convention, United Church of

Christ congregations are autonomous and can call whomever they want as a pastor.

“You will need to get your ministerial credentials transferred. But given your education, experience, and theological persuasions, that will not present a problem.

“If you are ready to do this, I’ll put you in contact with our area conference minister, who can help you officially make the shift. I’ll also do some research and find out what congregations in the state are looking for a pastor.”

“I’m ready to move forward on this,” said Paul.

“Then I’ll get on it right away. The Southern Baptist Convention’s loss will be the United Church of Christ’s gain.”

“Thanks for your confidence in me, Craig. I appreciate your friendship and support during this challenging time.”

Chapter 4

Possible Opportunity

Three weeks later Craig called Paul on the phone. “I’ve come upon a possible opportunity. In Sarah’s hometown, one of our UCC churches is seeking a transitional pastor.

“I know the church well. It’s a fine congregation. After a twenty-year tenure, their pastor is about to retire, and they want to wait a year before hiring a permanent replacement. They are offering a one-year contract to start with. But assuming things go well, and I fully expect they will, it could easily become permanent.

“A one-year commitment is not ideal, but it would get your foot in the door and likely turn into something good. Can I tell them about you and share your resume? I know the chair of the search committee, so she will take the recommendation seriously.”

Paul hesitated. *Leaving your spiritual family is hard, even when you know you must.* “Call and make the recommendation. And thanks so much for your help.”

* * *

Four weeks later, after reviewing Paul’s resume, contacting his references, scheduling a face-to-face interview with him, and making an incognito visit at Trinity Baptist Church to hear him preach, the search committee at Grace UCC sent Paul a letter.

Dear Reverend Graham:

The Transitional Pastor Search Committee would like to thank you again for your interest in Grace Church. After reviewing your biographical information, contacting your references, talking with you in person, and listening to your excellent sermon at Trinity, we are delighted to unanimously offer you the position of transitional pastor at Grace United Church of Christ.

Attached you will find detailed salary, housing, vacation, and benefits information. As we discussed at length during our recent meeting with you,

after one year of service, we will either end the transitional agreement or mutually agree to make the position permanent.

We look forward to hearing back from you soon. You are in our prayers as you seek God's direction concerning this important decision. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to give me a call.

Sincerely,

Linda Caldwell, Chairperson

“The offer certainly has its downsides,” Paul said to Sarah. “I’m only guaranteed a job for one year, which concerns me, although Craig assures me there’s an excellent chance it will become permanent. The church is only half the size of Trinity and has a small staff. And the salary is far less than I’m making now.

“On the other hand, it does provide a viable alternative to the severe theological problems I have with the Southern Baptist Convention. I can no longer tolerate the closed-minded doctrines.

“Nor am I comfortable with the leadership’s judgmental attitude and harsh intolerance against anybody who disagrees with them. It’s hard for me to see a future anymore in the SBC.”

Sarah encouraged Paul to take the job. “It will get you out of a denomination you don’t fit into and never did. The United Church of Christ lines up perfectly with your pastoral style and beliefs.

“Since the church is in my hometown, the girls can see their grandparents on a regular basis. It’s a great city to live in, including a vibrant arts community and excellent universities. It also has a large and good-quality public-school system, so I can easily find a teaching position there.

“I have interesting friends in town I know you will enjoy meeting And, even if the job only lasts one year, it will give you time to get established in a new community. Given

your credentials and abilities, I have no doubt you can find a permanent position.”

Feeling emboldened by Sarah’s comments, Paul said. “Assuming I accept the job, we need to see this move as permanent. For the girl’s stability and for your career, we need to stay put. If Grace doesn’t work out, I’ll find something else in town, even if it’s only an interim. If needed, I could explore options with the United Methodists or the Presbyterians. But I’m not moving our family again a year from now.”

Sarah said, “I wholeheartedly agree.” She paused, uncertain if she should continue. Then she said, “This is the right thing Paul, I just know it.”

Convinced by his wife’s instincts, which almost always proved correct, and his own positive inclinations, Paul accepted the offer.

* * *

The next evening, after all the Trinity staff members left the office, Paul walked into the empty sanctuary. He sat on the front pew of the church that had both blessed him and wounded him. Part of him felt relieved. After years of trying to stay in a church and a denomination that wasn’t right for him, Paul finally felt ready to go. Yet part of him also felt overwhelmingly sad about leaving.

The Baptist Church introduced me to Jesus. They baptized me. They became the family my own family could not be. They loved, affirmed, and nurtured me. They educated and ordained me. They gave me my vocation and provided me with significant opportunities of service.

But the Southern Baptist Convention is no longer my home. Neither is Trinity Church. I don’t fit in anymore. I guess I never really did. I cannot stay in a fundamentalist denomination and keep my integrity. Difficult as it is to leave, it’s past time to go.

As Paul walked out of the sanctuary into the parking lot for the drive home, he felt a deep sense of melancholy. *I know this is the right thing. But it’s also the hard thing.*

Over the next few weeks, Paul resigned from Trinity Baptist Church and left the Southern Baptist Convention forever. A few days later he, Sarah, Hope, and Joy packed their belongings into a moving van and moved to Sarah's hometown.

Chapter 5

Hardheaded Woman

“It feels good to be back in my hometown,” Sarah said to Paul as they drove across the city to meet the movers. “Tomorrow I’ll register the girls at their new elementary school.”

They arrived at the parsonage before the movers did. Paul took out his key and opened the door for Sarah. He grandly bowed and said, “Welcome to your new castle, Madam!”

Although Sarah briefly saw the house the night Paul interviewed for the job, by the light of day, it looked far more impressive. “It may not be as large as the Trinity parsonage, but it has lots of charm. We’re going to have a great life here, Paul.”

In a kind gesture, Grace Church put Paul on the payroll a week before his pastoral duties began, allowing the Graham family time to get settled into the parsonage. After unpacking all their boxes, Paul and Sarah made plans to improve the girl’s bathroom.

Paul said, “I think we should put up wallpaper.”

Sarah replied, “A blue paint job would be better.”

Paul countered, “I believe wallpaper would look nicer.”

“No,” Sarah firmly said, “Blue paint is the best option.”

With exasperation, Paul said, “You are so hardheaded.”

Without missing a beat Sarah replied, “Yes, and that’s just the way you like it!”

Just as he was about to resume the battle, Paul looked at his wife and burst out laughing at the inside joke. She returned the favor.

* * *

Fourteen years earlier, during the summer between his sophomore and junior year of college, Paul served as a youth ministry intern at his college congregation, First Baptist Church. During the internship Paul must have listened to his *Cat Stevens: Greatest Hits* cassette tape a hundred times.

While driving to a youth pool party one Friday evening, Paul popped the tape into his cassette player and enthusiastically sang along with *Cat Stevens's* "Hard Headed Woman."

A week before summer break ended, Paul went home to visit before starting his junior year. While there he ate lunch at Pop-In-Pizza with his high school friend Larry, who worked at his father's construction business.

They scarfed down a sausage and jalapeno pizza, like they used to do on Sunday nights after church youth group. As he poured another glass of Pepsi from the pitcher, Larry said, "Tell me about your love life."

Paul responded, "It's not very exciting."

"I want to hear about it anyway."

"Over the past four years," said Paul, "both in high school and college, I've dated about half a dozen church girls. All of them have been sweet and sincere in their faith. But for me something has been missing. I'm looking for someone more interesting, more complex, and I guess, if I'm totally honest, a bit more worldly."

Although Paul didn't say so, he figured that he, like Cat Stevens, was on the lookout for a "hardheaded woman."

During the fall semester of his junior year, Paul decided to take a one-hour elective course called "Faith and Science in Dialogue." He told his roommate Jeff all about the class.

“The course consists of assigned readings, vigorous dialogue, and sometimes challenging debate. I look forward to attending every week. The subject matter and discussions are highly engaging. There’s also an interesting girl in the class named Sarah Andrews.”

“Tell me more about her,” said Jeff.

“Actually, I know very little about Sarah except that she’s a science major. Since she is not in the religion or humanities department, I rarely see her outside of class. And she’s not a Baptist, so I never see her at church. But from what I can tell at our weekly class discussions, she is intelligent, kind, and has a good sense of humor.”

“What does she look like?”

“Medium height and build. Long brown hair. Brown eyes. Nice figure. A beautiful smile with cute dimples. Very attractive.”

“Maybe it’s time to ask her out,” said Jeff.

“Maybe I will,” replied Paul with a smile.

* * *

The next Thursday afternoon, right after class, Paul decided to make a move.

“Would you like to go to the Student Center and get a Coke? We could talk further about today’s topic.”

Sarah smiled and said, “Are you asking me to have an intellectual discussion with you, or are you asking me out on a date?”

Startled by her response, Paul stumbled a moment but finally said, “Both, I guess.”

“Then let’s go have a Coke,” she said.

* * *

The Coke eventually became dinner. And the discussion/date eventually became a three-hour, non-stop, all-over-the-map, exhilarating evening. Inevitably, the conversation got around to religion.

“So you’re going to be a preacher.”

“That’s the plan.”

“You don’t seem the type.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for one thing, I doubt many Southern Baptist preachers sign up for a class called ‘Faith and Science in Dialogue.’”

“We’re not all Bible thumpers,” Paul protested.

“All the ones I know are.”

“Well,” Paul said sarcastically, “Perhaps you need to meet some new ones.”

“Perhaps so,” she snapped.

Trying to lower the tension, Sarah asked him, “Where do you go to church?”

Paul answered, “I’ve been attending First Baptist Church since I arrived at college. This summer I served as their youth ministry intern. They asked me to stay on part-time during the school year, so I’m still working there.”

Still smarting from being associated with Bible thumpers, Paul added, “First Baptist identifies with the more progressive, moderate wing of our denomination. We are not as conservative as most of the churches.”

With more than a little pride, Paul added, “We even have women deacons at First Church.”

“My home church has a woman pastor,” replied Sarah.

Paul didn’t know what to say about that.

As the evening progressed, it became clear Sarah Andrews held theological views far different from the people Paul hung out with. He wasn’t sure what to make of her. Part of him felt attracted; part of him felt frightened.

Near the end of their discussion, they somehow got into a theological debate about miracles. Paul believed in them, at least some of them. Sarah did not.

In frustration Paul finally asked, “So, what do you believe?”

Sarah relied, “I believe in God without all the hocus-pocus.”

The answer pissed Paul off. “That’s not possible!” he exclaimed.

“It most certainly is,” she said. “Just ask my *female* pastor.”

The evening didn’t end well. As Paul walked back to his dorm, he thought, *Maybe I don’t want a hardheaded woman after all.*

Chapter 6

Worth the Wait

Sarah and Paul's second date went much better. The third, even better than the second. A few days after their third date, Paul went to the campus bookstore and purchased a card with colorful wildflowers on the front cover. Inside the card, Paul wrote down the month and day of their three dates.

September 20

September 27

September 29

With gratitude for three lovely evenings, and hopes for many more, Paul.

During fall break, over lunch at Pop-In-Pizza, Paul enthusiastically told Larry all about his budding romance with Sarah. When he finished, Larry said, "Man, you are totally smitten!"

"I guess I am," laughed Paul.

When he returned home for Christmas, he brought Larry up-to-date. "I went to meet Sarah's parents at Thanksgiving. The week after Christmas she's coming here to meet my parents. This is starting to feel serious."

Larry asked, "What about the religious differences between you and Sarah that you told me about during fall break. Are you concerned about that?"

"Not anymore," Paul replied. "While Sarah's religious beliefs sometimes color outside the lines of my theology, none are deal breakers. In spite of her bias against supernatural events, Sarah believes in God, affirms faith in Jesus, and enjoys connecting with a local congregation.

"In fact, she's now attending First Baptist with me. Recently, she helped with a couple of youth ministry events. The kids love her."

“Although she’s a chemistry major,” Paul added, “She’s fully capable of engaging in significant theological conversations and enjoys doing so. She also has a beautiful laugh, a keen mind, a strong independent streak that I find attractive, and an adventurous spirit. And it doesn’t hurt that she’s pretty and sexy!”

The two friends laughed. Larry had never seen his friend so happy.

* * *

Two months before their junior year came to an end, Paul and Sarah drove to the Sonic Drive-In. Paul ordered his favorite: a foot-long chili cheese hot dog, along with a root beer. Sarah ordered a burger, tater tots, and a Coke. As they talked, ate, and laughed, Paul thought to himself, *This woman would make one heck of a good wife.*

On their way back from Sonic to campus, they listened to Paul’s favorite radio station, Classic Rock 104. When Sonny and Cher came on, it almost felt providential to Paul. He and Sarah held hands and enthusiastically sang together, “I Got You Babe.”

* * *

Several days later Paul called Sarah on her dormitory telephone. “I have good news! This afternoon Pastor Green asked if I would be willing to work full-time again this summer. I immediately accepted.”

“That’s fantastic,” Sarah said. “With me in summer school, and you working at church, we’ll be able to see each other all the time.”

“I know,” exclaimed Paul, “Isn’t that great?”

“Great for you,” Sarah teased.

* * *

By the end of summer, Paul and Sarah openly declared their love for each other, and they began to tentatively talk about a life together after college. Things became so serious that Paul, in spite of his church’s warnings about the spiritual dangers of premarital intimacy, could think of almost nothing else.

Although a minister in training in a conservative denomination, he was also a red-blooded young man deeply in love with a beautiful woman. One night, as they kissed in his car, Paul tried moving to the next level.

Sarah gently stopped him. “I love you, Paul. But I’m not ready for that.”

“That’s OK,” said Paul, “I understand. We should wait.”

“Yes, we should,” Sarah replied. Then she smiled and said, “But I’ll make you a promise. I promise that it will be *worth* the wait.” They both laughed.

* * *

During Christmas break of their senior year, Sarah and Paul became engaged. By spring a plan began to unfold. During a trip back home over spring break, Paul eagerly explained their plans to Larry.

“As soon as Sarah and I graduate, we’ll get married. Then I’ll begin a two-year pastoral internship at First Baptist Church. They are pleased with my work and want to keep me on staff. They also like the idea of giving a young minister practical church experience before going on to seminary. It feels like a win-win for both me and First Church.”

Larry asked, “What will your responsibilities be?”

“My primary job will be overseeing student ministries. But I’ll also assist Pastor Green with pastoral duties, including hospital visitation, worship leadership, and occasional preaching. It doesn’t pay a lot, but it does provide a small house for Sarah and me to live in.”

“What will Sarah do during the two years of your internship?”

“Sarah has received a full-ride scholarship for graduate work in chemistry at Central State University, which is just a few miles from First Church. About the time she finishes her master’s degree, I’ll wrap up my internship. At that point Sarah and I will relocate for my seminary training.”

* * *

Two weeks after graduating from college, Sarah and Paul married at her hometown church, Second Presbyterian, with Reverend Linda Bradley leading the ceremony. In that beautiful old sanctuary, the young couple repeated the ancient vows of holy matrimony.

“I, Sarah, take you, Paul, to be my husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death we do part. This is my sacred vow.”

“I, Paul, take you, Sarah . . .” Paul’s emotions overwhelmed him, and he had to stop for a moment. He then regained his voice and continued, “To be my wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death we do part. This is my sacred vow.”

When the reception ended, they drove to their honeymoon destination and pulled into the hotel parking lot. After checking in, they went to their room. Paul even carried Sarah across the threshold.

After unloading their belongings and preparing for bed, they lay down together, embraced, and kissed. They placed their left hands together, wedding rings touching.

“I love you, Mrs. Graham.”

“I love you too, Mr. Graham.”

Paul looked into Sarah’s eyes and softly stroked her long brown hair. As he began to undress his beautiful bride for the first time, she teased him a bit. “Well, Reverend Paul Graham, shouldn’t you offer a prayer of some kind given the magnitude of the moment?”

Although he knew she was kidding, Paul took the bait. “We thank Thee, O Lord, for these gifts we are about to receive from Thy bounty, Amen.”

* * *

Late that night, after Sarah fell asleep, Paul remembered the promise Sarah made in his car almost a year ago. "I promise that it will be worth the wait." Although Paul waited a lot longer than he wanted, Sarah kept her promise. It was worth the wait.

Chapter 7

First Sunday

Paul's first task as pastor of Grace UCC was learning how to put on a clerical collar. "This is complicated," he complained to Sarah.

After helping him figure out the mechanics of the plastic collar and the metal tabs that held it in place, she teased him, "I think you look cute in your new dog collar. I bet it will keep ticks and fleas away for several months." They both laughed loudly.

Paul debated whether to wear a collar. He told Sarah, "Some clergy in the UCC wear one; others don't. However, I like the symbolism of it. It reminds me and others that I represent a faith tradition."

* * *

After figuring out how to put on his collar, Paul put on his new black pulpit robe. He told Sarah, "I'll need to buy four stoles—red, green, purple, and white—for the various seasons of the liturgical year. Unfortunately, clergy stoles don't come cheap."

Thankfully, Grace Church paid for the stoles as a gift to their new transitional pastor.

Paul told Sarah, "I've got a lot to learn about mainline church life, especially their worship. I've been reading up on the seasons of Lent and Advent and special holy days like All Saints Day. Although Grace is less formal than many liturgical churches, these special seasons and days are still important to them.

"I also need to memorize The Apostles' Creed since Grace recites it every Sunday morning." Paul's old denomination prided themselves on being noncreedal Christians, saying, "Our only creed is the Bible."

Paul continued, "Although it's new to me, I appreciate being part of a long line of historic Christian tradition, so I embrace the weekly liturgy of the creed."

* * *

As his first Sunday at Grace Church neared, Sarah asked, “What’s your sermon going to be about?”

“I’ve decided not to preach a traditional sermon. Instead, I’m going to share my faith story with the congregation, from my conversion in high school, to my early years in the Baptist church, to my evolution toward a more open-minded and inclusive understanding of faith.

“I’m only going to hit the high points, so that part will only take about ten minutes. Then I’m going to talk a bit about being a community of grace. I’ve already timed it out. I can get everything covered in about twenty minutes.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” said Sarah, excited about her husband’s new opportunity.

* * *

That Sunday, early in the service, Linda Caldwell, chair of the Transitional Pastor Search Committee said, “I’m pleased to introduce our new pastor to you, Reverend Paul Graham. I’m also happy to introduce you to his wife, Sarah, and their two daughters, Hope and Joy.”

After a few introductory comments, Paul said, “I’d like to answer a question several of you have already asked me. The question is, ‘What should we call you?’ The answer depends on your age.

“I’d like the children and youth to call me Pastor Paul. If you are an adult, I prefer that you simply call me Paul. I know some people are hesitant to call their minister by their first name. They think it lacks respect. But, according to Loretta Lynn, that’s not so.

“Loretta Lynn and Jimmy Carter are close friends. So Loretta has always called him Jimmy, even when he became president.

“A reporter once asked her, ‘Don’t you think it’s presumptuous of you to call the president of the United States by his first name?’

“Loretta replied, ‘I call Jesus by his first name.’

“After the congregation stopped laughing Paul said, “So I hope you’ll call me Paul. However, if that’s not comfortable for you, it’s fine to call me Pastor Paul or Reverend Graham.”

* * *

Later in the service, after the offering and choral anthem, Paul stood for the sermon. “Several years ago, after a Sunday morning worship service, my family and I loaded into the car for the drive home. Hope, who was only four years old at the time, said: ‘Daddy, are you tired? You look tired.’”

“I said, ‘Yes, Hope, I get tired when I preach.’

“She said, ‘Yes, I get tired when I listen.’”

After the laughing subsided, Paul said, “I hope not to tire you too much today.”

After sharing a few highlights of his faith journey, Paul said, “When I first heard about Grace UCC, I immediately felt attracted to your name. I’ve come to the conclusion that people in today’s world desperately need grace, not judgment. So my dream for our church is that we will always live up to our namesake.”

Paul then read from Matthew 9:10-13 NRSV:

And as Jesus sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

After reading the text, Paul said, “At his core, Jesus was a man of mercy and grace. He consistently loved, accepted, and welcomed imperfect sinful people into God’s family. And he calls his church to do the same, including our church.”

Paul transitioned to his concluding story. “A few months ago, Sarah and I went to the theater to see a new movie called *Awakenings*. Some of you may have seen it. It stars Robin Williams and Robert De Niro. If you haven’t seen it, and plan to, I apologize in advance for ruining it for you!

“*Awakenings*,” Paul explained, “Is based on a true and touching story about a group of catatonic patients at a state mental hospital who lived in a coma-like existence for decades. However, through the use of a new drug, a caring doctor wakes the patients out of their catatonic existence.

“Among them is a man named Leonard. After decades of living in a vegetative state, Leonard awakens to life. As the movie unfolds, we delight in Leonard’s progress and learn that he is an intelligent, sensitive, and loving human being.

“As the weeks progress, Leonard makes friends with a woman who regularly comes to the hospital to visit her father. She and Leonard hit it off and become fast friends.

“However, as the story unfolds, Leonard begins to regress. The miracle medicine slowly loses its effectiveness. Leonard begins to develop tics all over his face and body, and he knows it’s only a matter of time before he returns to his catatonic state. Before long the tics become so overwhelming that it’s difficult to watch him anymore.

“Still, the woman continues her friendship with Leonard. She accepts him as he is, even with his awful twitches. She still values him as a human being, cares about him, and affirms him. In short, she gives Leonard the wonderful gift of grace.

“Near the end of the movie, Leonard has lunch with this woman. As they eat, she tells him about a dance she recently attended. Leonard replies that he has never danced before and probably never will.

“After lunch they both stand up. As Leonard prepares to leave, he reaches out his trembling arm to shake hands with her, probably for the last time. She takes his hand but won’t let go. Instead, she puts Leonard’s arms around her in a dance position and

holds him closely.

“And there, on the cafeteria floor of the state mental hospital, she and Leonard begin to dance. As they dance, the camera focuses on Leonard’s face—beaming with joy in an incredible moment of grace.”

Paul concluded, “As I watched this remarkable woman dance with Leonard, I thought to myself, *This is the way it is with God and human beings*. Like Leonard, every human being twitches with flaws and sins and brokenness. And yet God, like this woman, holds us close with compassionate unconditional love and dances with us across the floor. I don’t remember the woman’s name. But I’d like to think her name was Grace.”

After pausing a moment, Paul invited the congregation to stand and sing, “Amazing Grace.” When they finished the song, Paul lifted up his right hand and gave the closing pastoral benediction, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.”

That afternoon, Paul sat in his recliner, pulled out his journal, and wrote, *June 15, 1991*. After writing all about his first Sunday at Grace, he ended his entry by saying, *For the first time in many years, I feel at home*.

Chapter 8

School Days

After settling into the parsonage and celebrating Paul's first Sunday at Grace Church, Sarah began her job search in earnest. Over the next week she interviewed at three high schools.

During her interview at Central High, the principle, Dr. Judi Davis, asked Sarah, "Why did you decide to become a teacher?"

"I didn't set out to be an educator," explained Sarah. "During high school and college, I dreamed of leading a research team at a pharmaceutical company. So I earned an undergraduate and master's degree in chemistry, with eventual plans to complete a Ph.D."

"What changed your mind?" asked Dr. Davis.

"Initially, my job as a high school chemistry teacher served only as a stopgap measure, something to pay the bills while my husband went to seminary. However, to my surprise, I fell in love with the job.

"I enjoyed working with the students, and I appreciated the comradery with my fellow teachers. I also liked the schedule. I noticed how well it worked for teachers with children. So I began to think seriously about staying in education. After seven years of teaching, I love it more than ever. It evolved from a job to a calling."

Dr. Davis smiled. Sarah knew the interview went well.

"I'll be in touch soon" said Dr. Davis.

* * *

As she drove home to the parsonage, Sarah recalled a crucial event in her vocational decision to become an educator. Eight years earlier, during her summer break before Paul's last year at seminary, Sarah made a trip home to visit her parents.

Sarah's mother served as a successful ob-gyn, one of only a few women in that field at the time. Her second day at home, Sarah and her mom went out to lunch. Sarah finally worked up the courage to tell her mom what she knew her mother did not want to hear.

"I haven't fully decided yet, but I'm thinking about staying in teaching after Paul graduates from seminary."

"Why in the world would you say that, Sarah? For years your dream has been to lead a pharmaceutical research team."

"Dreams sometimes change," said Sarah. "Over the past few years, my priorities have shifted. Getting my doctorate, finding a research job, climbing the ladder into management, and then actually running a pharmaceutical research lab would totally consume my life. I'd be on a constant treadmill, with virtually no time for other things."

"What other things?" her mother demanded.

"Having children for one thing," Sarah responded.

"I have a demanding career, and I had a child."

"But if I have children, I want to be fully engaged in their life."

"So, you're saying I wasn't a good mother?"

"No, Mom, I'm not saying that at all. I've always looked up to you and admired you. You've had an exceptional career."

"But?"

"But your career has defined your life. You've had almost no time for anything else."

"Like what?"

“Like showing up for my science fairs, or coming to my soccer games, or taking family vacations, or having hobbies, or having close friends, or having any interests beyond your work.”

“So, you are saying I was a bad mother.”

“No, I’m not! I’m just saying I want a life beyond my career. I want children. I want a community life. I want friends. I want to be involved in my church.”

“This is all about being a preacher’s wife, isn’t it?”

Sarah’s mom still had not made peace with Paul’s chosen profession, and she felt contempt for his conservative evangelical denomination.

“That’s not true,” Sarah snapped. “And just for the record, Paul has never pressured me to be the perfect preacher’s wife. Other than showing up on Sunday morning, which I would do anyway, whomever I was married to, Paul asks nothing from me when it comes to church.

“This has nothing to do with Paul’s job. The fact is, I love teaching. It’s deeply satisfying, especially when I can inspire girls to fall in love with science. Teaching also offers me the opportunity to have a life beyond work, including my family, my church, and my community.”

“It sounds like you are settling,” said her mother.

“Actually, it feels like an upgrade,” replied Sarah. “Influencing the lives of young people. Empowering girls to pursue science. Prioritizing my family. Serving my community. Having time for personal interests. That sounds like a far more enriching and successful life than working for an impersonal corporate entity.”

For a few moments neither of them said anything.

Sarah then added, “I was thinking the other day about the people that most positively influenced my life. Other than my family, all of them are teachers.”

Sarah’s mother considered fighting on. But she could tell that her daughter had already made up her mind.

“Well,” she huffed, “I think you are making a huge mistake.”

* * *

Three days later Sarah returned home to their seminary apartment. The next evening she sat on the sofa, watching a mindless TV show and eating leftover pizza.

With Paul out, studying for a summer term at the library, she decided to enjoy a lazy night at home. As she halfway watched the show, a commercial came on she had seen many times before but never paid much attention.

In the commercial a beautiful blonde woman, dressed in a high-powered business suit, walks into her perfectly decorated and spotless house. She then begins singing, “I’m a Woman.”

First, she sings about bringing home the bacon. Then, standing at the stove in her kitchen in a silk shirt, she sings about cooking the bacon in a frying pan. Finally, while wearing a sexy evening gown, the blonde woman seductively sings about pleasing her man.

Sarah laughed out loud at the absurdity of the ad. Like the woman on TV, Sarah once dreamed about being superwoman. She would work endless hours creating breakthrough drugs.

She would be a great mother, never missing any important events in her children’s lives. She would keep an immaculate home. She would enthrall her husband with mind-blowing sex. She would, in short, be the perfect American woman, just like the TV commercial.

But it's a lie. Nobody can have it all. Not men. And not women. We all have to make some choices about our priorities. So I choose balance. I'll have a meaningful career that makes important contributions in the lives of young people.

But I'll also be devoted to my family, my church, and my community. I can't be a superwoman. Nobody can. But I can be a good woman, and it will be more than enough.

Sarah turned off the TV. She opened the top drawer of her desk, took out the Ph.D. application lying there, and tossed it into the trash. Then she went into the bathroom and threw away her birth control pills.

About an hour later Sarah retrieved the pills from the trash can. *Maybe I better talk to Paul about this first!*

Later that evening, after talking with Paul late into the night, Sarah, for the second time that day, threw away her birth control pills.

Chapter 9

Unexpected Call

One year later, in June 1984, a month after graduating from seminary, and several weeks after his and Sarah's fifth wedding anniversary, Paul accepted a call to Trinity Baptist Church. Trinity, a midsize and multistaff church, proved an excellent first pastorate for a young, recent seminary graduate.

During Paul's first three years at Trinity, Sarah decided to be a stay-at-home mom for their newborn daughter Hope and then Joy. During Paul's last four years at Trinity, Sarah taught chemistry at the local high school.

Popular among the student body and respected among the faculty and administration, Sarah received the coveted "Teacher of the Year" award her final year. At her well-attended award dinner, Dr. James Caldwell, director of schools, introduced Sarah to the crowd.

Dr. Caldwell said, "Most of you know that Sarah has gained a reputation for inspiring interest in science among our female student population. During her second year with us, Sarah began a new initiative called, 'Girls in the Lab,' which proved hugely successful.

"This unique program of Sarah's garnered interest from a number of science educators. Eventually the *Journal of Science Teacher Education* invited her to write an article about it. During her tenure with us, the number of our college-bound female seniors declaring science as their major spiked dramatically. A good number of them have received generous scholarships.

"Although Sarah has been effective at promoting science awareness among girls at the high school level, she realizes those seeds need to be planted at an earlier age.

So she teamed up with two of our other faculty members—Amy Harding, who teaches English, and Donna Smith, who teaches art—to help promote interest in science

among elementary-age girls. The three of them collaborated on a unique children's book called *Girls Make Great Scientists*."

Holding up a copy of the book, Dr. Caldwell continued, "Their well-received book earned them a story on our local NBC affiliate mid-state news channel. And, as most of you know, several months later National Public Radio interviewed Sarah about the book and about her 'Girls in the Lab' program, bringing a lot of positive attention and honor to our school system.

"Sarah and her family are moving back to her hometown in a few weeks. Needless to say, we are going to miss her. But we wish her and her family well in their transition. I could go on, but tonight is Sarah's night, so I want to call her up to the stage."

As Dr. Caldwell handed her the award, he said, "Sarah, on behalf of the school board, our faculty, and all our students, I want to thank you for the excellent contributions you have made on behalf of children in this community."

As the crowd stood up and enthusiastically clapped, Paul couldn't have been prouder of his wife. Joy and Hope were ecstatic. Even Sarah's mother, who attended the event, finally conceded that her daughter's decision to be an educator was a good fit for Sarah's gifts and passions.

* * *

Although only six weeks had passed since Sarah received her "Teacher of the Year" award, much had happened. Paul resigned from Trinity and quit the Southern Baptist Convention. Sarah left her teaching position, and she, Paul, Hope, and Joy moved to her hometown.

They had settled into their new home. The girls were registered for school in the fall. Paul had officially begun his pastorate at Grace. And Sarah had already completed three promising interviews. Just a few days later, she had already received two job offers. While debating which of the two high school chemistry positions to accept, Sarah received an unexpected phone call.

“Ms. Graham, this is David Gilliam, dean of academics at Mid-State University. Dr. Beth Lancaster, principle at Martin Luther King Jr. Magnet High School, mentioned your name to me. Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

As Sarah excitedly explained to Paul after the call, “I know Mid-State University well. They have a well-respected science department. I seriously considered doing my undergraduate work there. However, the combination of my desire to leave home, the appeal of a small and intimate private school, and a generous scholarship offer dissuaded me from enrolling at Mid-State.”

“Yes,” replied Sarah to Dean Gilliam, “I can talk for a few minutes.”

David Gilliam explained the purpose of his call. “Dr. Lancaster received your application and resume a few weeks ago. Although highly impressed by your credentials, she has no openings in her science department.

“My wife and I are friends with Beth and her husband. She knows I’m looking for a new chemistry instructor and sent your information my way. I’ve carefully reviewed your materials, including your work in science awareness among female students. I’ve also contacted your references and received impressive reviews. Would you be willing to come in for an interview?”

The next day, Sarah drove to Mid-State University and walked into the Academic Dean’s office. The interview went exceptionally well.

“So,” Dean Gilliam asked, “Are you interested in the position?”

“Absolutely,” Sarah responded.

“Then we’ll have you meet with a committee from the science department next week, including several professors, two student representatives, and a member of the administration. If that goes well, I can offer you the position.”

The day after interviewing with the committee, Sarah met again with Dr. Gilliam. With a smile on his face, Dean Gilliam said, “Welcome to Mid-State University!”

Dr. Gilliam continued, “As you already know, you will need to teach some introductory science classes. But most of your teaching load will be in your field of chemistry. Although we can hire you as an instructor based on your master’s degree, we cannot place you on a tenure track without a doctorate.

“However, Mid-State belongs to a consortium of higher education institutions throughout the city. Faculty members are encouraged to do research and even earn degrees within the consortium. Southern College, a respected university in town, is part of that group.

“Southern offers an excellent Ph.D. in Science Education. The program offers significant flexibility, allowing students to focus on their specific area of specialty—chemistry in your case. If you wish, you can work on your doctoral degree at Southern at your own pace without any tuition costs. When you finish half of the program, we can place you on a tenure track toward a full professorship.”

“Will I be expected to get this degree?” Sarah asked.

“It’s not mandatory. But it will certainly be a boost to both you and the university.”

“Then I’ll seriously consider it.”

Even before she got to the parking lot, she knew her decision.

* * *

When Sarah returned home that evening and shared her exciting news, Paul grabbed the car keys and said, “Everyone load up into the car. We’re going out to celebrate!”

At dinner Sarah told her family, “I’ve decided to get a year of teaching at Mid-State under my belt before diving into the doctoral work. It will help get me orientated to

college teaching, and it will give all four of us some time to get settled into our new life here.”

* * *

Years later, at a class reunion, Sarah and her old college roommate Kathy talked for hours, catching each other up on their lives. Sarah told Kathy, “I took a minimal load throughout my doctoral studies. Once, when family responsibilities felt especially daunting, I pulled out for an entire semester.

“Throughout my coursework and thesis, I tried my best to maintain balance between work, home, and myself. I certainly didn’t pull it off perfectly. But in the end, I think I did it adequately. Although it took a lot longer than I originally envisioned back in our college days, my old dream of earning a Ph.D. eventually came true. However, rather than running a pharmaceutical lab, I now teach at a university.”

Kathy said, “It sounds to me like you made a good decision.”

Sarah smiled and replied, “Yes, I believe I did.”

* * *

Six years after she began her doctoral studies, on a beautiful Saturday morning in May, Sarah graduated from Southern College with a Ph.D. in Science Education. As she walked across the stage to receive her diploma, she glanced at Paul, Joy, Hope, and her parents, all waving wildly at her, bursting with pride and joy. As Sarah took the diploma in her hand, she thought, *Sometimes things just work out the way they are supposed to.*

Chapter 10

Three Questions

During his first few months at Grace, Paul scheduled listening sessions with large numbers of people in the congregation. He met with virtually every group in the church: Sunday school classes, youth group, senior adult fellowship, administrative board, staff, choir, service groups, and committees. During the listening sessions Paul asked numerous questions:

- How did you end up at Grace UCC?
- What do you most appreciate about our congregation?
- What do we do well?
- What do we need to work on?
- What is your favorite story or memory about our church?
- If you could change one thing about our church, what would it be?

Through this process Paul learned much about his new congregation. After completing all the listening sessions, he wrote up a summary of his findings and published it in the church newsletter.

A few days later Laura Hutchinson called him on the phone. Laura, president of the largest Sunday school class at Grace, said, “Reverend Graham, my class greatly enjoyed your listening session with us, along with your written summary of all your sessions. We want to know if you would be willing to do a reverse listening session.”

Paul asked, “What do you mean by a reverse listening session?”

Laura replied, “Our class would like to meet with you again. But this time we’d like to ask you the questions. We feel it would be a good opportunity to get to know you better.”

“I’d love to do that. Let’s set a date on the calendar.”

Three weeks later Paul met with Laura’s class. They met at Sally and Jacob Winford’s home in their large downstairs den. With over forty people in attendance, the room was packed. After some snacks and small talk, the questions began.

“Tell us about your children.”

Paul smiled and said, “Hope is a third grader. She loves soccer and reading. Joy is a first grader, and her passion is dancing.”

“What interests do you have beyond work?”

“I like to read. I enjoy watching movies. I love soft rock music, especially on vinyl records, and I have a fairly extensive collection. Sarah and I and the girls enjoy camping and canoeing together. And, about a year ago, I took up journaling and I love it. I call it “therapy you can afford.”

After a few minutes, the questions became more serious. A member of the class said, “On your first Sunday, you mentioned that you were not brought up in church. You said you became a Christian during your junior year of high school but didn’t give many details. Would you mind telling us more about that story?”

“I’d be happy to,” said Paul. “It all started with a girl.” After the laughter subsided, Paul told the story.

“A few days before my junior year of high school, my family and I moved to a new city in the south. My dad, a wizard at turning inefficient factories into productive ones, received an offer to revitalize an aging aluminum plant. So, for the ninth time in my life, I moved to a new town.

“During the first few weeks of school, I met a girl named Jenny. Before long she invited me to a youth group party at her congregation, Calvary Baptist Church. I’d never been

to church before, but I figured when a pretty girl invites you to go out with her, a smart guy says yes.

“Over the next few months, I went to Sunday school classes, worship services, and Sunday night youth group. Although I felt uncomfortable with some of their conservative beliefs, people warmly welcomed me, quickly learned my name, and made me feel valued.

“I’d never experienced anything like that before. It felt like home. I heard a lot of talk about God’s love, about being a part of God’s family, and about being ‘saved.’”

Paul, speaking more reflectively, continued his story. “Although I could not have articulated it at the time, the truth is, I desperately needed to be saved.

“The constant moving for my dad’s career took a toll on me. Dealing with my family’s dysfunction, especially my dad’s drinking, proved even more difficult. Given my unhealthy family dynamics, along with the frequent moves, I lacked important foundations in my life.

“I did not belong to a nurturing and loving family. I was not rooted in a community. I did not have any long-term friendships. I had no clear values or meaning. I did not enjoy the benefits of being connected to a community of faith. Inside I felt insecure and uncomfortable in my own skin. If truth be told, I was lost in just about every way a person can be lost.

“Then one Sunday morning, several months after I first started attending Calvary Baptist, the pastor preached a sermon on becoming a child of God and a member of the family of faith. When he extended an invitation to walk forward and accept Christ, I felt an overwhelming tug at my heart.

“Without any hesitation, I walked down the center aisle, took the preacher’s hand and said, ‘I want to be saved.’ The next Sunday he baptized me. After he plunged me under the water and I resurfaced, I felt two things I had never experienced before. I felt loved,

and I felt like I belonged. I had indeed been saved.”

For a moment, the group remained quiet. Then one of the men asked, “Other than your conversion and baptism, what has been the most formative spiritual experience of your life?”

Paul thought for a moment. “It probably sounds strange, but my most formative spiritual experience beyond affirming faith in Christ was a lecture I heard during my sophomore year in college. It had such a huge impact on me that I still remember almost every word. But first, you’ll need a bit of background.

“By the time I entered college, church was the entire focus of my life. Already planning a career in ministry, I majored in religious studies with plans for graduate school in seminary. And yet I lived in constant spiritual angst. Most of that angst came from reading the Bible.

“The Baptist Church, then and now, insisted that the Bible was the inerrant and infallible Word of God. Every word—including theology, ethics, history, and science—had to be taken absolutely literally. However, even in high school, I knew that could not possibly be true.

“Troubled by what I read in Scripture, I went to see my pastor. I asked him a lot of hard questions like,

- Why is God so angry and violent in the Bible?
- Why did God tell the people of Israel to commit genocide? Why did God approve of slavery?
- Why are women treated so horribly?
- Will all nonbelievers really spend eternity in hell?
- Why are there so many contradictions in the Gospel accounts of the birth and resurrection of Christ, and other key stories?

- Why did God's beloved Son Jesus have to die a bloody and brutal death in order for God to forgive our sins?
- Did God really create the world in six days?

"My pastor had no satisfactory answers to these questions. He just told me to have faith in God, believe the Bible, and then sent me on my way. Given all these unanswered questions, by my sophomore year in college, I had about given up on faith, church, and ministry.

"Then I registered for a class called Modern Scholarship and the Bible taught by a recent Ph.D. graduate and new professor named Bill Sanford. Dr. Sanford began his first lecture by reading from 2 Kings 2.

"That's the story about the prophet Elisha walking down the road and coming upon a group of boys. When the boys saw his bald head, they began to tease him, saying, 'Go away, Baldhead! Go ahead, Baldhead!' In anger Elisha called down God's curse upon the little boys.

"Immediately, two vicious bears emerged from the woods and mauled them. Unfazed by the screaming, violence, and blood from the bears ripping the little boys' bodies apart, Elisha continued his journey into the city.

"After reading the text, Dr. Sanford said, 'So what do you think of this story?' A young woman in the class said, 'It's perfectly horrible and I don't believe it. How could a loving God send vicious bears to rip apart and kill little boys just for teasing a prophet?'

"A young ministerial student smugly said, 'God said it. I believe it. That settles it.'

Passionate debate continued for about fifteen minutes. I listened to every word, totally spellbound.

Dr. Sanford finally said, "Somewhere along the way, every believer must answer a crucial question about this story and so many others like it that are found in the pages of the Bible.

“Are such passages meant to be taken literally? Does God really send bears from the woods to kill little boys for teasing a prophet? Or is it possible this was a campfire story the ancient Israelites told their children and grandchildren to engender respect for the holy prophets of old?”

“At that point, Dr. Sanford laid out an approach to Scripture I had never heard before. He argued that the Bible, while inspired of God, is also a human document. He said, ‘People, not God, wrote the Bible. And they wrote it according to the worldview of their time, which was a prescientific world. For example, the biblical writers believed that the world was flat and that mental illness was caused by demons.’

“Then Dr. Sanford said something that changed my life forever. He wrote in bold letters on the blackboard. *‘Although we must always take the Bible seriously, we don’t always have to take it literally.’* After giving time for the sentence to settle in, Dr. Sanford said, ‘I’ll see you on Wednesday. Class dismissed.’”

Paul paused for a moment, then said, “For me, ‘seriously but not literally’ felt like the burning bush, the parting of the Red Sea, and the resurrection of Jesus all rolled into one. I realized, if the Bible doesn’t have to be taken literally, then I don’t have to choose between science and faith.

“I can believe God created the world, but he did so through the process of evolution. If the Bible doesn’t have to be taken literally, it means I don’t have to believe that God is violent and genocidal. Instead, that’s the understanding ancient people had about God before Jesus taught them that God is love.

“If the Bible doesn’t have to be taken literally, women don’t have to be second-class citizens. If the Bible doesn’t have to be taken literally, non-Christians are not necessarily doomed to hell. If the Bible doesn’t have to be taken literally, the hot-button ethical arguments of our day like abortion are not black-and-white, either/or issues, but gray and ambiguous.

“It’s not an exaggeration to say that Dr. Sanford’s lecture saved my faith.”

What Paul did not yet know is that while Dr. Sanford's lecture added two decades to Paul's faith, eventually that shelf life would expire, long before he wanted it to.

By now Paul had been talking with the group for over an hour. Although everyone was enjoying the experience, the class leader, said, "I think we have time for one final question."

A long-term class member did the honors. "Reverend Graham, we all know that when you came to Grace, you left the Southern Baptist Convention and united with the UCC. Can you tell us how you came to that decision?"

Paul looked at his watch and said, "How much time do we have?"

Everyone laughed. "Given the time, I'll give you the Cliff Notes version tonight, and we can talk about it in more depth another day. In a nutshell, I left the Baptist church because I no longer fit in a fundamentalist denomination.

"As to why I affiliated with the UCC, I can answer that in two statements. First, I appreciated the fact that the UCC allows people to have a thinking faith. And second, I was drawn to the UCC's emphasis on grace instead of judgment."

Paul concluded, "It's way past time to wrap this up. Thanks to all of you for being here tonight. I've had a wonderful time. It's a joy and privilege to be your pastor."

Since the trip home was fairly long, Paul pulled out one of his eclectic homemade cassette tapes. As he drove home, he sang along on Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a Changing," John Denver's "Poems, Prayers, and Promises," Elton John's "Tiny Dancer," Jim Croce's, "Don't Mess Around with Jim," and The Beatles, "Come Together."

He then joined in on Billy Joel's "Piano Man." He pulled into the parsonage before the song was over, so he parked the car and finished the song.

Chapter 11

Private Loss

“Thanks for fitting me into the clinic this morning,” said Sarah.

“No problem at all,” Sarah’s mom replied. “So, what’s this about?”

“A couple of weeks ago,” explained Sarah, “I begin to feel physically off, especially in the mornings. I ignored it for a while. I told myself it was just the stress of moving and starting up a new life. But the symptoms won’t go away.”

“What are your symptoms?”

“Fatigue and nausea.”

“How long has it been since your last period?”

“Too long.”

After running a pregnancy test and taking an ultrasound, Sarah’s mother confirmed her daughter’s hunch. “It looks like you are about nine weeks along.”

“Oh my,” replied Sarah.

“So,” Sarah’s mom asked, “is this good news or bad news?”

“Unexpected news,” responded Sarah. “But good, I think.”

“You know I can’t ethically serve as your physician on this pregnancy.”

“I understand, Mom.”

“You’ve met my colleague Dr. Coreen Long. She’s excellent. I can refer you to her.”

Sarah, who liked and respected Coreen, said, "That will be perfect."

* * *

Late that evening, after the girls went to bed, Sarah told Paul, "I have something important to tell you."

Paul, looking concerned asked, "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine," Sarah replied. "But I've been feeling strange lately. And my period, which is always irregular, was far later than usual. So I went to see my mother today. She confirmed my instinct. I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant!" Paul exclaimed. How is that possible?"

"I think you know the answer to that question."

Paul laughed. "Yes, I guess I do."

"In the process of the move, we got a little sloppy with our birth control. Anyway, I'm about nine weeks along."

Sarah let the news soak in for moment. "So," she asked, "what do you think?"

"To be honest," replied Paul, "I'm shocked. This is not what I expected at this point in our lives. But," he added, "I'm also pleased. In fact, I think it's absolutely fantastic!"

Sarah smiled and said, "So do I."

"Maybe this time it will be a boy. But either way, boy or girl, it doesn't matter." With a large smile on his face he said, "How exciting! When do we tell the girls?"

"Given all the changes in their lives over the past few months, I think we should wait another month or so before we share this news with them."

“That’s probably a good idea,” Paul responded.

“There’s just one problem,” said Sarah.

“What’s that?”

Where in the world are we going to put a nursery?”

“I don’t know,” said Paul, “But we’ll figure it out.”

Paul lay awake half the night thinking about options for a nursery. By morning he had come up with a creative plan.

When Sarah woke up, he told her all about it. “That’s perfect!” she exclaimed.

Just as he was about to get out of bed, Sarah smiled and said, “Since we don’t need birth control, and I’m already pregnant, why don’t you stay for a while?”

Paul was more than happy to comply.

Over the next few weeks, Sarah and Paul never spoke to the girls about the baby. But at night, when they lay in bed together, it was all they could talk about.

* * *

Twelve weeks into her pregnancy, Sarah woke feeling poorly. When she went to the bathroom, she noticed the blood. “Paul,” she exclaimed, “Come quickly!”

Paul rushed to the bathroom, saw the blood, and said, “Do you think we’re losing the baby?”

“I’m not sure,” Sarah said, fighting back the tears. “But I think it’s likely.”

An hour later, Sarah arrived at her mother’s clinic. Paul had to officiate at a funeral that morning, so she had to go alone. Dr. Long examined her. After the exam, Sarah’s mom

joined them for the consultation. She gave her daughter the bad news.

“I’m sorry, honey. You’ve lost this pregnancy.”

As Sarah began to weep, her mom held her closely and said, “I’m so sorry,” over and over again.

After Sarah regained her composure, Dr. Long said, “I hate to add to your troubles Sarah, but you’re going to need a D&C. We can schedule it tomorrow morning.”

* * *

Later that day, after a lot of tears and after a long talk, Sarah said to Paul, “Since nobody knows about the pregnancy other than you, me, and my mother, I think we should keep this loss to ourselves. It doesn’t seem fair to put this trauma on Hope and Joy during this major transition in their lives. And I see no value in sharing this news with the congregation, especially so early in your tenure.”

Although Paul had reservations about keeping such an important secret, he could see the wisdom of her argument. “You’re probably right,” he said.

“Since I’m already on fall break, I won’t need to schedule any time off for the D&C. I’ll tell the girls I’m having female problems and that I need to rest for a few days.”

* * *

That night, while his family slept, Paul went to the den and closed the doors. He took out his *Sweet Baby James* album and placed it on the turntable. He put his headset on so he wouldn’t wake Sarah or the girls and placed the needle on “Fire and Rain.”

When James Taylor got to verse two and sang about finding help from Jesus, Paul began to cry. However, after turning off the record player, Paul’s tears turned to anger. *Why the hell did God allow this to happen?*

* * *

The following Monday morning, after the girls left for school, Paul and Sarah sat at the kitchen table, drank a cup of coffee, and talked about the events of the past week.

Paul asked Sarah, “If the baby had lived, what would you have liked to name it?”

“If it were a boy, I think I would have liked to name him Adam, after my grandfather. And if it were a girl, I think I would have liked the name Rachel.”

With his voice quivering, Paul replied, “Those would have been lovely names.”

Sarah began to whimper. Paul took her hand and joined in her grief.

They didn’t speak for a while. After the tears subsided and they found their voices again, Sarah asked Paul, “Why does God allow such awful things to happen?”

“I don’t know, Sarah. I never have. And I don’t think I ever will.”

* * *

Late that evening, Paul wrote in his journal,

October 22, 1991: Sarah asked me today why God allows terrible things to happen, including miscarriages. I told her I don’t know. Which is, of course, the truth. But maybe the answer is more complicated than that—and more troubling. Maybe the actual answer is that God—as we’ve historically known God—as a personal, providential, all-powerful, and all-loving heavenly father—is an inaccurate understanding of God. Maybe God is nothing like that at all. I’m not saying that’s the case. But it sure feels that way today. I’ve never felt the absence of God more profoundly than I have this past week.

Paul considered writing more. After all, he had been grappling with these dangerous ideas long before Sarah lost the baby. But rather than continue down this threatening road, Paul put his pen back in his pocket and placed his journal back in the drawer. *I don’t want to think about this right now.*

But Paul would think about such things, many times, in the years to come. And those unwanted and unorthodox thoughts would eventually bring him a world of hurt and trouble.

Two months after the miscarriage, when things finally felt better, Sarah told Paul, “Although I wanted the baby more than anything, and the loss was horrific, I’m so grateful to have you, Hope, and Joy. It’s more than enough.”

Paul held his wife closely and said, “Yes, it certainly is.”

Chapter 12

Honeymoon

By any measure Paul had an exceptional honeymoon at Grace Church. On his six-month anniversary, he received a phone from Craig Frazier, the minister who first recommended Paul for the position at Grace.

“How’s it going?” asked Craig.

Paul replied, “I just completed all my visits to parishioner’s homes. I know this pastorate will rise or fall based on my relationships with the members, so I’ve prioritized this above all else. I’ve also been working hard on preaching, leading meaningful worship services, and providing solid administrative leadership.

“The efforts seem to be paying off. Attendance has increased, several new families have joined, and church finances, which have been strained for several years, have significantly improved. I feel like we’ve gotten off to a good start.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been hearing,” said Craig. “I’m proud of what you are doing at Grace. Keep up the good work!”

* * *

Seven months after his arrival, Paul ate lunch with Glen Hightower, chair of the church council. Glen said, “Paul, we are delighted with your initial work at Grace. Although I love our former pastor, the truth is, he fell asleep at the wheel his final few years before retirement. And the council likely encouraged that.

“We didn’t advocate for any new initiatives, nor did we challenge him or ourselves to step beyond the status quo. Everybody grew complacent and comfortable, and we stagnated as a church. You are bringing new life and energy to our congregation, and I deeply appreciate what you are doing.”

Glen continued, “I realize you are still technically our transitional pastor, with only five

months left on your contract. But I don't know a single person in the congregation who doesn't want to make this arrangement permanent. So, setting that nonissue aside, what is your perspective on Grace? What direction do you see us going in the future?"

Paul, who had been thinking about that question since he first arrived, was more than ready to answer.

Paul replied, "It seems to me that Grace seems shy, apologetic, and almost embarrassed about its progressive theological culture. And I get that. We live in a city that is overwhelmingly conservative and evangelical. Our community is full of religious-right, Moral Majority kinds of churches. But people looking for that kind of religion will never connect with our congregation. So there's no use even trying to reach them."

Glen said, "I hadn't really thought of it like that before. But you're probably right."

Paul continued, "For years now, I've sensed a growing backlash against religious-right religion in America. People, at least some of them, are growing weary of angry, arrogant, closed-minded and judgmental Christianity.

"For example, when evangelical leaders say horrific things about homosexuals, it turns off a lot of folks, especially young people. Several years ago, when a well-known religious-right leader said, 'God does not hear the prayer of a Jew,' plenty of people thought, *If this is Christianity, I want no part of it.*

"When conservative churches tell women they cannot be ministers and they must submit to their husbands, a lot of people cringe. And, when churches tell people they must choose between faith and science, plenty of folks walk away and give up on religion."

"I don't disagree with you," Glen replied. "But how does all of that impact our work at Grace Church?"

“I think this growing discontentment with conservative evangelical religion provides Grace Church with an exceptional opportunity. Instead of shying away from our progressive theology, I think we should *embrace* it. I believe we should enthusiastically and boldly communicate that we are an open-minded and grace-filled church.

“In short, I’m suggesting we provide a viable and positive alternative to religious-right theology. Our city has large numbers of progressive-minded people who would be open to a church like that. Those people are our niche. Let’s focus on them.”

Glen Hightower liked what he heard. *This young man is going to make a significant impact on our church.*

* * *

A few weeks later Glen called the church council meeting to order. After approving the minutes and wrapping up a few details from the last meeting, Glen said, “Paul has a recommendation for us.”

Paul began by reviewing his lunch conversation with Glen about Grace Church embracing their progressive theology. Then he said, “I’d like to recommend that we adopt a congregational motto. My suggestion is, *An Open Church for Open-Minded People.*

“We could put the motto everywhere: on our sign out front, on our stationary letterhead, on the front cover of all our worship bulletins, in our small weekly ad in the local newspaper, and on the front page of the church newsletter.

“Every Sunday morning, when I give the opening announcements before the worship service begins, I can say, ‘Welcome to Grace United Church of Christ, an open church for open-minded people.’”

After a lengthy discussion, and with Glen’s wholehearted support, the Council accepted their young pastor’s suggestion.

* * *

In the months ahead, Grace experienced significant revitalization. Large numbers of new visitors came to visit, primarily folks who had given up on church but decided to give this “Open Church for Open-Minded People” congregation a try.

“With Sarah’s help, Grace started a new young adult Sunday school class. After just ten weeks, they ran out of space and had to move to a bigger room. Worship attendance increased so much that Paul began to think about adding a second, more casual and modern service.

* * *

One of the many young families who began attending Grace had never been to church before. Several months later they told Paul, “We would all like to be baptized and join your membership.”

Paul asked them, “What attracted to you our congregation?”

The mother of the family said, “The sign out front that says, ‘An Open Church for Open-Minded People.’ We thought all churches were narrow-minded and judgmental. So, when we saw your sign, we decided to visit. When we discovered the church inside lived up to the sign outside, we wanted to become members.”

The next Sunday, with the family’s permission, Paul told this story to the congregation. “This,” said Paul, “is who we are.” Many in the congregation nodded their heads in agreement. Several did so with tears in their eyes.

* * *

As Glen predicted, after his one-year contract came to an end in June 1992, calling Paul as permanent pastor proved to be a nonissue. After an opening prayer and reviewing the minutes from the previous church council meeting, Glen said, “The Transitional Pastor Search Committee recommends that we call Reverend Graham as our permanent pastor.”

“I’ll second that motion,” said Jack Curry.

“OK, we have a motion and a second. Is there any further discussion?”

After several members of the committee spoke in favor of the motion, Glen said, “It sounds like we are ready to vote.”

The motion enthusiastically passed at the council meeting and was unanimously affirmed at a churchwide business meeting at the close of worship the following Sunday. When the decision was made, the entire congregation stood up and enthusiastically clapped. As they did, Paul glanced at Sarah, and they smiled at each other.

Reverend Paul Graham was now the permanent pastor at Grace UCC, in full standing with the United Church of Christ. At the following church council meeting, he even received a substantial raise. Sarah’s responded, “It’s time for a new family car.”

Chapter 13

Worst-Kept Secret

A few weeks after Paul's one-year anniversary, after Joy and Hope went to bed, Paul told Sarah, "That Tommy Branson is gay is the worst-kept secret at Grace Church."

"It's certainly no secret to me," Sarah said.

"My point precisely," Paul replied. "Over the past year I've been talking to members of the congregation about the growing controversy over homosexuality in the American church. I've learned that like many mainline churches, Grace is not of one mind on this issue.

"Some members feel that gay relationships are perfectly fine. Others do not approve, although they mostly keep their opinion to themselves. The best I can tell, the majority of the congregation feels ambivalence on the matter."

"But everyone seems to love Tommy," Sarah injected.

"No doubt about it. When it comes to Tommy, there is no ambiguity. Numerous members have said to me, 'Tommy is part of our church family, we love him dearly, and he is welcome in our faith community.'

"Glen tells me that given Tommy's long-term presence in the congregation, yet his reticence to talk about his sexual preference, Grace eventually developed an informal 'don't ask, don't tell' position on the matter.

"Over time, says Glen, an unspoken agreement has slowly gained traction among the congregation that all people, including gay people, are welcome at Grace, especially Tommy and his friend Brad Taylor."

Sarah, thinking about the Southern Baptist Convention's brutal condemnation of gays, said, "What a nice change of pace."

* * *

A few months later, in September 1992, Paul called his friend Craig Frazier. Since Craig helped Paul get the job at Grace, and since he was familiar with the church and knew several of the leaders, Paul kept him in the loop about important matters.

After a few minutes of small talk, Paul explained the purpose of his call. “Craig, I’m calling about Ted and Eva Branson. I think you know them.”

“Yes, I do,” replied Craig. “They’re great folks.”

“You may not know it,” Paul said, “but Ted and Eva have a grown son named Tommy. He’s attended Grace Church with his mom and dad all his life. They still sit together in the same pew they’ve sat in for over three decades. Although neither Ted, Eva, nor Tommy have spoken about Tommy’s sexual orientation, everybody in the congregation knows that Tommy is a homosexual.”

“That’s news to me,” said Craig. “I didn’t know they had a son, much less a gay son.”

“Unfortunately,” Paul explained, “Tommy has not been well. At first, when he got sick, nobody thought much about it. Figuring he had a temporary illness, the congregation expressed concern, sent cards, and kept him in their prayers. However, after repeated illnesses and extended stints in the hospital, people began to have suspicions. In the end, it proved impossible to keep Tommy’s diagnosis a secret.

“Just yesterday we learned that Tommy has AIDS. We’re all devastated.”

“I’m sorry to hear this news, Paul. This is obviously going to be overwhelmingly challenging for the Branson family. It’s also going to be difficult for you and the church. Given the current climate around AIDS, this has the potential to create a lot of discomfort and conflict. I’m afraid your honeymoon at Grace is over.”

“I’m afraid you’re right,” Paul replied.

“You will be in my prayers,” Craig said. “Please keep me posted on how this story unfolds.”

“I will,” Paul promised.

* * *

Paul had heard about AIDS for years, especially recently. Ten months earlier, near the end of 1991, Freddy Mercury, lead singer for Queen, died of the disease. About the same time, basketball great Magic Johnson announced that he had AIDS. And, just five months before Tommy’s diagnosis, the news broke that tennis star Arthur Ashe had AIDS.

Still, ignorance and fear about the disease prevailed throughout America, including churches. The majority of church folks considered AIDS a gay men’s disease that didn’t impact them. However, that luxury was no longer possible for Paul and Grace United Church of Christ.

At first, Paul felt afraid to touch Tommy. He wondered, *Can I catch his disease from a handshake or a hug? Am I putting my family at risk?*

In spite of public health efforts to educate the public, Paul, like many others, was still ignorant about the transmission of the AIDS virus. Sarah quickly put her husband’s fears to rest.

She informed Paul that he could not catch AIDS from casual human contact. She explained that the only way to acquire AIDS was to share bodily fluids with an affected person through sexual contact or shared needles. “It’s a scary disease,” Sarah conceded, “but learning the facts can help dissipate people’s fears. This is an opportunity for our congregation to spread love rather than fear.”

Chapter 14

Pickup Chapel Service

In the months that followed, Paul journeyed with Tommy, Ted, and Eva through their awful ordeal. He spent long hours sitting in hospital rooms and then at an AIDS clinic. During Tommy's stay in the clinic, Paul visited him every week. This week Paul went on a Tuesday afternoon. He found Tommy reading in his bed.

"Good to see you Pastor Paul," Tommy said with a smile.

"Good to see you," replied Paul. "The members at Grace send their love and prayers your way."

"I appreciate that," replied Tommy. "I miss being there."

"We miss having you there. So, how are you feeling these days?"

"The past few weeks have been rough. But I've made progress in recent days. My lungs are clearing up. The doctors say I should be able to go to my parents' home in a week or two."

"I know Ted and Eva will love having you back home."

"They've been incredibly supportive throughout this entire ordeal. I hope they know how much I appreciate them."

"I'm sure they do," said Paul.

After talking several more minutes, Paul asked, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Tommy thought for a moment. "Actually, there is. Would it be possible for you to bring me Communion? It's always been special to me, and I haven't had it in months."

“I’d be more than happy to do that. I’m tied up tomorrow, but I can drop by on Thursday, and we can take Communion together. I look forward to it.”

Before Paul departed, Tommy said, “Pastor Paul, I’d like you to meet my roommate. This is Jason Harding.”

Paul turned his attention to Jason, lying in the other bed in the room. He shook his hand and said, “Nice to meet you, Jason.”

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Jason replied. “Reverend,” Jason added, “I couldn’t help but hear you talking about Communion. Would you be willing to include me on Thursday? I’d love to take Communion again. It’s been a long time.”

“I’d be happy to,” Paul said.

Jason explained his situation. “I went to church my entire life. But my home church is extremely conservative, so I never told my parents or my congregation I was gay.

“When I got AIDS, my parents told me, ‘We no longer have a son.’ I haven’t seen them since. A few weeks later, my pastor wrote me a letter saying I had been removed from the membership. He told me not to return. That was about a year ago.” Paul could see tears forming in Jason’s eyes.

“I’m deeply sorry to hear that, Jason. I hope you know God hasn’t rejected you. God still loves you and claims you as his beloved child, regardless of what your parents and church might think.”

“I hope that’s true,” said Jason.

“I know it’s true,” replied Paul. He paused a moment and said, “I look forward to seeing both of you on Thursday and celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion together, just as we do at church.” Paul offered a prayer for Tommy and Jason, and left.

* * *

Late Wednesday afternoon, Paul received a phone call at the office. “Reverend Graham, this is Lisa Woodford. I’m the social worker at the AIDS clinic where Tommy Branson is a patient. I have an unusual request.”

“What can I do for you, Lisa?” asked Paul.

“Tommy and Jason told some of the other patients you were coming tomorrow to serve them Communion. Several of the men asked if they could be a part of that. Pretty soon the whole ward was talking about it. They asked me to call you.

“They want to know if you would be willing to do a service for all of them. If so, they plan to invite everyone on the ward. We have a room right off the lobby you could use. It’s not large, but our ward only has twenty patients, and they won’t all come, so the space would work fine.

“Is this something you would be willing to do? It would mean a lot to the men. Many of them grew up in church but haven’t been in years.”

Paul didn’t hesitate. “I would love to do so.”

* * *

The next day Paul returned to the AIDS clinic and set up for Communion. One by one, young men began to enter the room. Some walked on their own; some used canes or walkers. Two came by wheelchair, rolled into the room by their comrades.

Paul greeted each of them individually as they came in, shook hands with them, and asked them their names. In all, seventeen of the twenty patients came to the pickup chapel service.

After a few opening comments, Paul said, “I’m not much of a singer, and we don’t have a pianist, but I thought we might start with a song. Are there any requests?”

Before anyone responded, Jason said, “Billy plays a mean harmonica. He could play a hymn for us to sing.”

Billy grinned, took his harmonica out of his pocket, and said, “How about ‘Amazing Grace’?”

“That would be perfect,” replied Paul.

After they sang, Paul said, “Before we take Communion, I’d like to tell you a true story. Years ago, on a trip through Tennessee, Fred Craddock, a minister and seminary professor, stopped at a restaurant where he met an old man, long retired. When the elderly gentlemen found out Craddock was a preacher, he told him the following story from his childhood.

“The old man told Craddock he had been born and raised in a little village near that restaurant. He had a single mother, and they were very poor. He was what they called back then an ‘illegitimate child,’ a child born out of wedlock.

“When his mother and he came into town on Saturday, all the good people shunned them. They wouldn’t let their kids play with him, and some of them walked to the other side of the street when they saw him and his mother coming. He had many fights with boys at school over the names they called him and the bad things they said about his mother.

“They had a little church in that village. The boy went to it sometimes. He would sneak in after the service started and slip out before the benediction so he wouldn’t have to face the church people and feel their disapproval.

“One day a new pastor came to the church. To check him out, the boy slipped into a back pew halfway through the service. He liked his sermon. The pastor was young and talked so the boy could understand him.

“But then the new preacher pulled a fast one on the boy. After the sermon he walked to the back of the church, announced that he wanted to meet everyone present, and then pronounced the benediction. The boy was trapped.

“He waited until the church was empty, hunkered down in the corner, hoping the pastor would not notice him. But he did. The new preacher walked over to him, thrust out his hand, and said, ‘Glad to see you boy. And tell me, who is your daddy?’

“The boy turned red and dropped his head. The preacher didn’t know the details, but he knew he had asked the wrong question.

“The pastor took the boy by the chin, pulled up his face, looked him straight in the eye, and said, ‘Oh, you don’t need to tell me. I already know. I see the family resemblance. I see it in your face. *You are a child of God.*’ The boy’s name was Ben Hooper. He went on to become the governor of the state of Tennessee. Imagine that.”

Paul planned on beginning the service of Communion right after the story. However, as he looked at these young men, many of whom had been rejected by their family and church, he spontaneously began to sing, “Jesus loves me, this I know.”

As he did, the men joined him, “For the Bible tells me so; Little ones to him belong; they are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.”

At the conclusion of the song, there wasn’t a dry eye in the room, including Paul’s. He then said, “As we come to the table of Holy Communion, let us remember—this is the table of Jesus. These elements remind us we are beloved children of God, and all of us are welcome.”

Chapter 15

Haunting Question

A week after the Communion service at the AIDS clinic, Paul went to visit Tommy's parents, Ted and Eva. By now nobody in the Branson family pretended that Tommy wasn't gay or that he didn't have AIDS. During their visit, Ted told Paul, "The doctors tell us Tommy's long-term prognosis is bleak. But thankfully, he's doing a lot better for now, and the docs say he can come home from the hospital tomorrow."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Paul.

Eva, looking anxious, had an important question for her pastor.

"Pastor Paul, given his diagnosis of AIDS, and the deep fear that instills in people, will Tommy still be welcome at Grace Church?"

* * *

That evening, Paul told Sarah about his visit with the Bransons and about Eva's haunting question, "Will Tommy still be welcome at Grace?"

"In pastoral circles, ministers often ask one another the question, 'Is this a ditch you are willing to die in?' It's our way of asking, 'Is this particular battle worth risking your entire ministry for?'

"I've been thinking about that question a lot since I found out Tommy has AIDS. I've decided that Tommy's continued relationship with Grace is a ditch I'm willing to die in. More than ever, Ted, Eva, and Tommy need a community of faith to help them through this nightmare. I also believe Tommy's illness offers a powerful opportunity for our congregation to clarify our core identity as a community of grace. But I'm not naïve. This battle is not going to be easy."

"No," Sarah said sadly, "It's not."

Paul continued, “The fact is, fear, ignorance, and even hysteria about AIDS still prevail in today’s culture. People think they can catch AIDS from causal contact: a hug, a handshake, or using the same bathroom. Even being in the same room with an AIDS patient feels threatening to many people.

“Although the folks at Grace are good-hearted, they will not be immune from such fears. I had similar fears myself before you set me straight. The more I think about this situation, the more I realize we’re going to need professional help if we are going to convince the congregation to stick with the Bransons and be church family for them.”

“So, what’s your plan?” asked Sarah.

“I don’t know him well, but that young doctor, Richard Mosely, who has been attending lately with his wife, Sandra, specializes in infectious diseases. I made a few inquiries today and learned that Dr. Mosely works closely with large numbers of AIDS patients. So I’m going to attempt to enlist him to lead an educational campaign among the congregation.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Sarah replied. “I hope he will cooperate.”

“Before I do this,” Paul said, “I need to know I have your support. This could end badly for me. If so, it will have serious consequences for our entire family.”

Without hesitation Sarah said, “You have my full support, Paul. This is a ditch worth dying in.”

* * *

Two days later, after carefully explaining the details of the situation to Dr. Mosely, Paul asked, “Would you be willing to help our congregation navigate this difficult challenge?”

Dr. Mosely said, “I would be honored to do so.”

As soon as he got home, Paul told Sarah about Dr. Mosely’s willingness to help. He

then said, “Over the past few months, I’ve gotten extremely close to Tommy, Ted, and Eva. I’ve deposited a lot of chips into my pastoral care bank with all three of them. So I’m going to cash in a few of those chips tomorrow.”

The next afternoon Paul went to visit the Bransons.

“I need for you to give me a month to prepare Grace for this challenge. Over the next four weeks, I’m asking that you not attend worship services. During that time we are going to educate the people at Grace about AIDS and prepare them to welcome Tommy back to the congregation.”

Trusting their pastor’s intentions, they agreed.

* * *

Over the next few weeks, Grace Church got a crash course in AIDS, primarily led by Dr. Mosely and his wife Sandra, a pharmacist. Paul joined them in their presentations, offering a theological and church family perspective. From large gatherings to small groups, virtually every member of the church entered the ongoing education and conversation about AIDS.

Ten days before Tommy returned to Grace, Paul called a churchwide meeting to debrief what the members had learned and discussed.

* * *

“We are here tonight to talk about the situation with Tommy. For almost three weeks, all of us have been in conversations with one another on this subject. If you have any final questions or comments to make, tonight is your opportunity to do so.”

Immediately, a mother with three young children said, “If Tommy Branson comes back to Grace, I’m leaving. I’m not putting my children at risk to prove some theological point by Pastor Graham.”

Although plenty of people had positive comments about welcoming Tommy back to church, several members echoed her sentiments.

Clearly, Paul realized, this is not going to be easy.

A few days later Paul received an anonymous letter at the church office.

Pastor Graham,

There are people in our congregation who don't agree with homosexuality. The Bible says it is wrong, and we don't think our preacher should imply that it's OK. Lots of people here do not want to be around a man with AIDS. It puts all of us at risk. If you keep pushing this agenda, I'll be leaving Grace Church, and I won't be the only one.

A Concerned Member

Paul instantly felt a knot in his gut. *I wonder how many people feel this way. Am I making a huge mistake here?*

Paul reread the letter, then put it in his desk.

This is a ditch I'm willing to die in.

Chapter 16

Welcome Back

The following Sunday morning, one week before the Branson's scheduled return, Paul stood before the congregation and read Mark 1:40-43 NRSV:

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

After the reading Paul said, "In Jesus's day, people considered lepers to be unclean. Nobody would go near a leper, much less touch one. They were banished from their community and left to suffer and die alone.

"Jesus, however, rejected such inhumane treatment. Instead, he saw people with leprosy as beloved children of God who needed touching, loving, and healing. Today's text tells us that Jesus, filled with compassion, touched a leper and made him whole.

"Over the past few months, I've spent a lot of time with numerous young men who have AIDS. Some of them have been abandoned by their family. Many others have been rejected by their church. All of them are scared and desperately need human love, warmth, and touch. In truth, people with AIDS are modern-day lepers. Like the leper in today's reading, they need compassion and the healing touch of grace.

"Over a year ago," Paul reminded them, "On my first Sunday in this place, I told you that when I first heard about our church, I felt attracted to the name—*Grace Church*. I mentioned that in today's world people desperately need grace and not judgment. I told you that my dream for our church is that we will always live up to our namesake.

"Next week, Tommy Branson is coming back to Grace Church. We've spent a month learning from Dr. Mosely, a highly respected expert in the field of AIDS, that Tommy is not a medical threat to any of us or to our children. More than ever before in their entire

life, Tommy, Ted, and Eva need a community of grace. It's time for us to step up to the plate and offer that grace to them."

* * *

The following Sunday, Ted, Eva, and Tommy Branson returned to Grace Church. They sat in their pew like always. A few people greeted them. But the tension was palpable. After the opening hymn, Paul stood in the front of the congregation and said, as he did every Sunday, "The peace of Christ be with you."

The people responded, "And also with you." Paul then said, "We come to this place today not only as individuals but as a church family. Please greet one another in Christian love and community."

At first, people standing around the Branson family didn't know what to do. Finally, Sarah, Dr. Mosely, and his wife Sandra made a beeline for the Bransons, shook their hands, and gave them a warm and loving embrace.

With that, the dam of fear and ignorance broke open. Almost every person in attendance walked up to the Bransons and shook their hands, patted them on the back or hugged them, and welcomed them back home to Grace. The passing of the peace, which usually took about a minute, took fifteen minutes to conclude. Paul never felt prouder of a congregation in his life.

However, it came at a cost. As Paul later explained to Craig during a phone call, "The person who wrote me that anonymous letter told the truth. Plenty of people in the congregation were not happy about having a gay man with AIDS at their church.

"The best I can tell, we lost about thirty members over the decision to welcome an AIDS patient. I don't think they are bad people, just fearful. But they are gone, and they are not coming back.

"In the end, I believe this decision will help build Grace's reputation as a community of compassion, inclusion, and open-mindedness in our community. We've already seen a significant increase in first-time guests. I think we are going to land on our feet."

Paul's instinct proved correct. Within a year Grace far more than made up the difference in lost membership. People in town began to hear stories about an open-minded community of grace, and they wanted to be a part of it.

* * *

A year and a half after Tommy was first diagnosed with AIDS, on a Thursday afternoon, Paul stood behind the pulpit at Grace, looked at his congregation, and said, "We have gathered here this afternoon to worship God and to witness to our faith as we remember and celebrate the life of Tommy Branson. May God grant us grace, that in pain we may find comfort, in sorrow hope, in death resurrection."

The sanctuary, packed with people who loved Tommy, also wanted to show their love and support for Ted and Eva. Although Paul felt deep grief over Tommy's death, he also felt overwhelming gratitude for the privilege of pastoring a loving and grace-filled church.

* * *

A few days after the funeral service, Paul dropped by Ted and Eva's home for a visit.

Eva said, "Paul, we want to thank you for your compassionate ministry to Tommy throughout his illness. You also did a magnificent job at his funeral." For a moment she choked up and had to stop. When she regained her voice, she said, "Ted and I deeply appreciate all you have done for Tommy and for us. We love you, and we're so glad you are our pastor."

For almost an hour, Paul, Ted, and Eva talked about Tommy, the conversation interspersed with both laughter and tears. As they talked, Paul thought to himself, *What an extraordinary privilege it is to be a pastor.*

As the conversation came to an end, Ted said to Paul, "Eva and I can't begin to tell you how much we appreciate the support of our church family during this horrific time. But there is one thing I still cannot wrap my head around. If God is indeed a loving, powerful, and compassionate heavenly Father, why does he allow something as awful as AIDS to exist?"

Paul did his best to respond. But the truth was he didn't have a clue.

Chapter 17

Bad Religion

Paul was pissed. In fact, he could not remember the last time he felt so angry. One week after burying Tommy Branson, Paul watched the evening news while eating a takeout dinner from Taco Bell. Sarah, Joy, and Hope were out for one of their regular Girls' Night Out.

Soon after the release of Philadelphia, a film about AIDS starring Tom Hanks, the evening news ran a story on AIDS and religion, including an interview with a well-known religious-right leader.

He said, "God created AIDS to punish homosexuals, to show there's a price to be paid for practicing a lifestyle that God calls an abomination. As the Bible says, 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'" Paul got so upset he could not finish his dinner.

Later that evening Paul wrote in his journal,

February 16, 1994: For the past year and a half, I have seen the ravages of AIDS up close and personal. It's been a brutal and deeply disturbing thing to behold.

Tommy Branson, a kind, gentle, and fine man, did not deserve to suffer and die like this. And Ted and Eva sure didn't deserve to watch their son waste away, suffer, and die. The idea that God created AIDS to punish homosexuals for their sin is cruel and perverted theological bullshit.

The next morning Paul decided to change his plans for Sunday's sermon. Although it was Thursday, and he already had finished his sermon for that week, he put it in a file for another day and began writing a new one.

Paul began the sermon with a story about Charles Darwin that Sarah shared with him several months earlier. She told Paul, "I came across a story that I think you will find

fascinating. I thought perhaps you could use it in a sermon someday.”

Today was the day.

* * *

Paul stood, paused, looked at the congregation, and said, “More than 130 years ago, way back in 1859, Charles Darwin published his famous and controversial book, *On the Origin of Species*, which laid out his theory of evolution.

“You may know that at the end of his life, Charles Darwin was an atheist. However, that was not always the case.

“Darwin, raised as an Anglican Christian, planned on becoming a clergyman. He even studied for the ministry at Cambridge University. So, how did this devout believer come to renounce his faith?

“Many people believe Darwin lost his faith because of his belief in evolution. But that is incorrect. Darwin always insisted that evolution was completely compatible with Christianity. To the end of his life, Darwin argued that ‘one can be an ardent theist and an evolutionist.’ Neither science nor the theory of evolution caused Darwin to lose his faith. So, if science did not cause Darwin’s atheism, what did?

“The bottom line is that bad religion caused Darwin to become an atheist. For example, Charles Darwin had a beloved daughter named Annie who died at the age of ten. Darwin was utterly devastated by her death.

“He said to a friend, ‘We have lost the joy of our household.’

“Darwin blamed God for Annie’s death. Like many people then and now, he believed that if someone died, it was God’s will. Darwin came to hate God for taking his daughter. He eventually quit believing in God altogether. He simply could not believe in a God that killed off ten-year-old girls. And I don’t blame him.

“I don’t believe in a God who kills off little children either. You will never convince me in

a million years that God does such things. How would you love and worship a God like that?

“If time permitted, I could give you other examples of how bad theology undermined Darwin’s faith, including the belief that Jews would spend eternity in a devil’s hell. In the end, it was not science but bad religion that caused Charles Darwin to renounce his faith.”

After sharing Sarah’s story about Darwin, Paul moved to the body of his message. “Unfortunately, there’s still a lot of bad religion out there, and it still causes people to lose their faith, as it did for Darwin.

“We saw a vivid example of bad religion just this week. As many of you know, a major leader of the religious right went on national TV and said that God created AIDS to punish homosexuals.”

Remembering Tommy’s funeral a week and a half earlier, and feeling anger well up inside of him all over again, Paul went off script. He raised his voice and said, “This kind of toxic Neanderthal thinking is theological pornography, and we should reject it with every fiber of our being.”

Realizing he was pushing too hard, Paul paused for a moment to calm down. He then returned to his planned comments.

“Although this comment about God creating AIDS to punish homosexuals is an extreme example, there’s a lot of bad religion in America today. Examples include closed-minded religion, judgmental religion, arrogant religion, intolerant religion, religion that tells women they are inferior to men, religion that tells women they cannot be ministers, religion that tells gay people that God hates them, religion that tells people that science is the enemy of faith, religion that tells people they are not allowed to have doubts and questions, and on it goes.

“Tragically, bad religion *abounds* in America today.

“So, what is the proper response to bad religion? Some argue that the answer to bad religion is no religion. Atheists argue that since religion can be so unhealthy, we need to get rid of faith altogether. But that’s not going to happen, at least not anytime soon. The real answer to bad religion is *good religion*.

“And that brings me to today’s text. In Jesus’s day, organized religion had gotten off track and lost its way. In short, religion in the time of Jesus had gone bad. Religious leaders had made faith in God bad news instead of good news.

“They were arrogant, authoritarian, intolerant, closed-minded, mean-spirited, and extremely judgmental. Anybody that disagreed with their narrow view of God was considered to be the enemy, and they attacked them without mercy, including Jesus.

“In fact, they dogged Jesus at every step. So, in today’s text, and in the entire chapter of Matthew 23, Jesus let them have it. He was downright harsh with them, calling them ‘hypocrites, blind guides, whitewashed tombs, and a brood of vipers.’ This is not the sweet baby Jesus we sing about every Christmas!

“It’s interesting to me that these religious leaders were the only people Jesus didn’t like and couldn’t get along with. Why is that? It’s because their harsh, judgmental religion turned people away from God instead of toward God, and that broke Jesus’s heart. So he rejected their religion of arrogance, judgment, and intolerance, and called instead for good religion: religion of grace, love, compassion, inclusion, justice, and mercy.”

Paul paused for a moment. Then he applied today’s message to his local context.

“Promoting good religion is what Grace Church and the UCC are all about. We are not perfect by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, we often fail. But we genuinely try to offer healthy faith to the world.

“We promote a religion of grace, not judgment. A religion of love, not hatred. A religion of humility, not arrogance. A religion of open-mindedness, not intolerance. A religion of service, not selfishness. In other words, we attempt to follow the life, example, teachings, spirit, and attitude of Jesus.

“In short, Grace, along with other UCC churches—and plenty of other churches and denominations—tries to offer our community a church of good religion. We certainly don’t do it perfectly, but it is our goal and our mission.”

When Paul wrote his sermon a few days earlier, he debated how to conclude. He decided that he wanted to give a positive, vivid, real-life example of the kind of Jesus-like loving, compassionate, nonjudgmental, and grace-filled church he was advocating. A few months earlier he had come upon a moving story and decided it would be a good way to end his sermon.

“I’d like to conclude today by telling you a story told by a professor and author named Tony Campolo. In this story Tony tells about traveling to Honolulu, Hawaii, to speak at a conference. Upon arriving, Tony went to his hotel and fell asleep. He woke at 9:00 a.m. his time, but in Honolulu it was 3:00 a.m.

“Wide awake and hungry, Tony walked to a small, twenty-four-hour diner near the hotel and ordered coffee and a doughnut. At 3:30 a.m., a group of provocatively dressed prostitutes walked in the door. Their loud and crude talk made Tony uncomfortable, so he prepared to leave.

“But then he heard one of the women say, ‘Tomorrow’s my birthday. I’m going to be thirty-nine.’”

“Her friend responded, ‘So, what do you want from me, a birthday party? You want me to get you a cake and sing ‘Happy Birthday.’”

“‘Come on!’ said the woman. ‘Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that’s all. I don’t want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I’ve never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?’”

“When Tony heard those words, he made a decision. He stayed in the diner until the women left. Then he asked the owner, ‘Do they come in here every night?’”

“Yeah” he said, ‘You can set your clock by it.’”

“Tony said, ‘What’s the name of the woman who sat next to me?’”

“That’s Agnes,” he replied.”

“What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?”

“A smile crossed the owner’s face, and he said, ‘That’s great! I like it! I’ll even make the cake.’”

“At 2:00 the next morning Tony went back to the diner. He put up crepe paper decorations and a big sign that said, ‘Happy Birthday, Agnes!’ The workers at the diner obviously got the word out because by 3:15 just about every prostitute in Honolulu crowded into the place. At 3:30 sharp, the door swung open, and in came Agnes and her friends.

“Tony had the entire group scream, ‘Happy Birthday, Agnes!’ Agnes, absolutely stunned, felt so overwhelmed her friend had to hold her up. Everyone in the diner began to sing, ‘Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday dear Agnes, Happy birthday to you.’

“When they brought out the cake covered with thirty-nine candles, Agnes began to cry. Too overcome with emotion to blow out the candles, she let the owner of the diner blow them out for her. Before she cut the cake, Agnes hesitated. She asked if she could take her cake down the street, show it to her mother, and then come right back. The owner of the diner said that would be fine, so she did.

“When the door closed behind Agnes, silence filled the diner. Tony broke the silence by saying, ‘What do you say we pray?’ It probably seemed a strange thing for a roomful of prostitutes to bow their head in prayer, but that’s what happened. Tony prayed for Agnes and for the other prostitutes in the diner, affirming that they were beloved

daughters of God with great value, worth, and promise.

“When Tony finished the prayer, the owner of the diner said, ‘You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?’ In a moment of divine inspiration, Tony said, ‘I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.’”

Paul paused to let the story linger for a while. He then concluded, “I don’t know about you, but that’s the kind of church I want Grace United Church of Christ to be. Dear God, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Before Paul could announce the final hymn, a remarkable thing occurred, something he had never experienced before. People spontaneously stood up all over the sanctuary and began to clap. They did so for a long time.

Paul basked in the glow of Sunday for the next several days. However, that warm feeling came to an abrupt end when the mail arrived on Wednesday. For the second time since he arrived at Grace, Paul received an anonymous letter. The brief letter said:

Reverend Graham,

Although a lot of our members seem to appreciate sermons that glorify homosexuals and prostitutes, some of us do not.

A concerned member

Paul pulled out the previous anonymous letter threatening to leave if Grace allowed Tommy Branson to return to church. The handwriting was a perfect match.

At least this person is still attending, Paul said to himself, feeling a lot humbler than he did during the standing ovation on Sunday morning.

Chapter 18

Professor for a Day

Near the end of Sarah's third year at Mid-State University, after an afternoon faculty meeting, Dean Gilliam said, "Sarah, do you have time to drop by my office for a few minutes to discuss the fall schedule?"

"Certainly," replied Sarah.

When she arrived, he said, "I'm finalizing plans for our required freshman classes in the fall. If you like, you can opt out of teaching introduction to life science and focus on your chemistry classes and doctoral studies."

Sarah thought for a moment, "I appreciate the kind offer, Dean. But I'd like to keep the class. It allows me to meet new students. It helps me build relationships with young people who might consider majoring in science. And, while my primary passion is chemistry, it's important for me to keep up in the general field of science. So, if you can use me in the fall semester lineup, I'd be happy to teach the intro class."

Dean Gilliam said, "Actually, that would be helpful. I'll put you down on the schedule."

During summer break, Sarah decided to revise her lesson plans for the life science class. She told Paul, "As you might guess, a large portion of the class necessarily focuses on evolution. And every year a good number of my students struggle with the content. This is the South after all, and most of these students grew up in conservative evangelical churches where evolution is seen as an enemy of faith."

"I can certainly relate to that," Paul said. "Between high school and college, when I was still new to faith and church, I grappled with the relationship between science and religion—especially evolution. So I scheduled an appointment with my pastor.

"During our conversation I said to him, 'The Bible says God created the world in six days. But I've learned in science that the world evolved over billions of years. It's hard

to fit both of these together. Do Christians have to quit believing in science in order to believe in Jesus?”

“What did he say?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t remember his exact response. But it was not helpful in the least.”

That fall, in September of 1994, as Sarah expected, some of her life science students pushed back on the subject of evolution. One young man said, “My pastor says the theory of evolution is a lie from the devil.”

While most of her students did not express such an extreme view, clearly a number of them felt uncomfortable with the subject. That afternoon, as she sat in her office and made plans for her upcoming classes, Sarah had an idea.

Several days later, after dinner, Sarah said to Paul, “So, how would you like to be a professor for a day?”

Paul replied, “What are you talking about?”

Sarah reminded him of their previous conversation about students in her class who struggled with evolution. “So I came up with the idea of devoting two class periods to the subject, ‘Faith and Evolution: Two Views.’

“I thought I’d invite a conservative evangelical pastor to visit my class one day and give his view on the subject. Then at the next class you come and give an alternative view. I ran the idea past my class this morning, and they loved it. So, how would you like to be a professor for a day?”

“It sounds like fun,” Paul said.

The next day, as Paul worked on his life science class lecture, he interrupted Sarah as she graded chemistry exams. “I’ve been working on my evolution and faith

presentation. I'm afraid it's pretty boring."

Sarah, preoccupied with her grading, said, "You'll do just fine, Paul. You always make excellent oral presentations. Just think of it as a sermon." She went back to grading her exams.

About an hour later, Paul interrupted her again. "Do they have good audiovisual equipment in the life science lecture room?"

"State of the art," she replied.

"And what's the name of the AV guy? I met him a few months ago at the faculty and staff summer picnic."

"Tom Chandler. Why do you ask?"

"Because I've got an idea," Paul said.

* * *

The following Wednesday, Sarah's class heard from a well-known conservative evangelical pastor in their community. Reverend Williams told the class, "When faith and science collide, as they do on the subject of evolution, faith must take precedence over scientific theories. If I have to decide whether man descended from monkeys or God created us, I'll choose God every time."

That Friday, Paul stood before Sarah's life science class and began his presentation. "Two years ago, a college student from my congregation set an appointment to visit me during his fall break. A science major, he had hopes of a career in genetic research. He's currently in graduate school. Anyway, he told me he was struggling with the issue of science and faith, especially evolution.

"He said, 'Although I believe in God, a literal reading of Genesis is impossible for me. As badly as I want to maintain my Christian faith, I cannot forfeit my mind in the

process.’ I will never forget the question he asked me that day. ‘Pastor Paul, can I be a scientist *and* a Christian?’”

Paul wrote the question on the blackboard. “Broadly speaking, that’s the question we are exploring today. However, our focus needs to be more limited. So, over this next hour, we will ask the question, ‘Can I be a Christian and still believe in evolution?’

“As you likely know, this is not a new question. Way back in 1925, evolution was hotly debated in a Tennessee courtroom. A public-school teacher named John Scopes was put on trial for violating a state law against teaching evolution in public schools. They called it the ‘Scopes Monkey Trial.’

“During the proceedings battle lines were drawn; no middle ground existed. You either believed in godless, atheistic evolution; or else you believed in God, Christianity, and the Bible. Back in 1960, Hollywood made a movie about that trial, a classic called *Inherit the Wind*. With the help of your top-notch AV director Tom Chandler, I’d like to show you some clips from the movie today. Let’s start with the opening scene.”

With that, Tom Chandler dimmed the lights and projected the scene onto the large screen in front of the room. A public-school teacher was teaching a high school science class.

As he stood before his class, he said, “For our science lesson today we will continue our discussion of Darwin’s theory of the descent of man. As I told you yesterday, Darwin’s theory tells us that man evolved from a lower order of animals. From the first wiggly protozoa in the sea, to the ape, and finally to man.”

At that point, the county sheriff, who had been standing at the back of the room with some other public officials, walked to the front of the class and interrupted the teacher’s lecture. He said, “You are charged with violation of Public Act 31428, which makes it unlawful for any teacher of public schools to teach any theory denying the creation of man as taught in the Bible. I hereby place you under arrest.”

For the next forty minutes, Paul interspersed his lecture on faith and evolution with several brief but poignant scenes from the film along with spirited class discussion. During his presentation he laid out both scientific and biblical problems with a literalist approach to creation, including the fact that the book of Genesis includes two separate creations stories that differ from each other and cannot be reconciled.

He then offered an alternative view. “The position I’m advocating for today is called ‘theistic evolution.’ This position affirms, along with science, that the universe was created by an evolutionary process. However, people who hold this view believe that God directed that process.”

Paul succinctly explained this view, then reinforced it with a clip from the film where the schoolteacher says, “Life comes from a long miracle. It didn’t just take seven days.”

Paul then concluded, “Theistic evolution provides a satisfying synthesis of science and faith that makes both spiritual and scientific sense for millions of Christian believers, including me.” He then looked at his clock and said, “Our time is almost over. So, before we conclude, I’d like to show you the final scene from *Inherit the Wind*.”

At that point AV director Tom Chandler projected the final minutes of the movie onto the screen. In the scene, right after the trial concluded, the attorney who defended John Scopes for teaching evolution was picking up his things from a table, including two books. The first book was *The Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin, which first laid out the theory of evolution. The second book was the Bible.

The attorney picked up Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and then set it down. Then he picked up the Bible and set it down. Back and forth he went, holding one book, then the other. *Which to choose? Biology or Genesis? Reason or faith? Science or Spirit?* Finally, the attorney picked up both books, Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* and the Bible, tucked them under his arm, and walked out of the courtroom.

When the scene was over, Paul paused for a moment. Then he asked, “So, can you be a Christian and still believe in evolution? The answer is yes—a thousand times yes!

“It’s been good talking with you today,” Paul said. “I appreciate your attention and participation.”

Sarah, who felt exceptionally proud of her husband said, “Thank you, Reverend Graham, for visiting with us today. I’ll see all of you next Monday. Class dismissed.”

Sarah and Paul stayed in the classroom to talk to students as they departed. After everyone left, and only the two of them remained, Paul said, “So, what’s my pay for teaching your class today?”

Sarah, with a flirtatious smile said, “You’ll get your pay tonight, Reverend Graham.”

Chapter 19

Happy Anniversary

In June 1995, on his four-year anniversary at Grace Church, Paul was just about to pronounce the final benediction. However, Glen Hightower, chair of the church council, stopped him. “I’m sorry Paul, but I need to interrupt you for a moment.” Although surprised, Paul yielded the service to his friend. Glen then invited Paul and the congregation to take a seat.

Glen said, “As everybody here knows—other than Paul—today is Pastor Appreciation Day at Grace Church. Some of you know that Carolyn and I have a niece who serves as a UCC minister. I called her earlier this week and told her I got drafted to give a speech for this occasion and asked her if she had any suggestions.

“Her first suggestion was, ‘Be brief!’ She also told me a story I could share that would fit the spirit of the day. She called the story ‘The Three Envelopes.’”

Glen continued, “The story is told about a pastor beginning a new pastorate. As he set up his office, he came upon a letter in the top drawer of the desk. Stapled to the letter were three sealed envelopes numbered one, two, and three.

The letter came from the previous pastor. It said, “Welcome to First Church. When things get bad, open envelope number one. When things get really bad, open envelope number two. When things get unbearably bad, open envelope number three.” The new pastor thought, *What a negative guy. Things won’t get bad here.* He promptly pushed the letter and the three envelopes to the back of the drawer.

“Everything went fine for a year. But then the situation turned bad. The pastor remembered the letter and eagerly opened up envelope number one. It said, ‘Blame the previous pastor.’ On Sunday morning the pastor said, ‘I know we’ve been having some problems around here, but it’s all the previous pastor’s fault.’ The people all said, ‘Amen,’ and everything smoothed over.

“Things rolled along fine for a while. But a year later the situation got really bad. The pastor went to his drawer and pulled out envelope number two. It said, ‘Blame the denomination.’

“On Sunday morning the pastor stood up and said, ‘I know we’re having problems here, but it’s all the denomination’s fault.’ The people all said ‘Amen’ and everything calmed down for another year.

“Finally, after three years, things became unbearably bad. The pastor hated to use the last envelope but felt he had no choice. He went to his desk and opened envelope number three. It said, ‘Prepare three envelopes.’”

The congregation erupted with laughter. After people quieted down, Glen said, “Paul, we hope it’s a long time before you have to prepare three envelopes!”

Glen then said, “Paul, on behalf of the entire congregation, I want to thank you for being our pastor. These past four years have been among the most vibrant in our church history, in no small part because of your leadership.

“We’ve gained large numbers of new members, especially young families. Worship attendance has significantly increased, along with giving. We’ve finished a major expansion of our nursery and children’s department. Our youth group is stronger than ever. We’ve begun several new community ministries. We’ve partnered with The Community Help Center in significant ways, serving the most vulnerable people in our city.

“Under your leadership, we’ve gained clarity about our core identity as an open-minded and grace-filled congregation. Perhaps most important of all, there’s a positive spirit of energy and enthusiasm throughout the entire church.”

Glen pulled an envelope out of his Bible. A member shouted, “That’s envelope number one!” and everyone laughed.

Then Glen said, “Given the remarkable progress we have made over the past four years, our church decided to observe Pastor Appreciation Sunday today. As a token of our appreciation for you and your family, we are giving you an additional two weeks of vacation this year, to be used whenever you and Sarah want, although we encourage you to take it as soon as possible.

To help pay for the vacation, we’ve taken up a love offering from the congregation.”

Glen handed the envelope to Paul and said with warm emotion, “Thank you Paul, for being our pastor. We love you, we appreciate you, and we hope you stay at Grace for many more years.” Glen then embraced Paul with a big hug.

Paul, fighting back tears, said, “Thank you Glen, and thanks to all the rest of you. I’m grateful to you and to God for the privilege of serving in this good place.”

With that, Paul gave the final benediction, and the entire congregation went downstairs to the fellowship hall for a potluck lunch, followed by a humorous but good-natured “roast” of Pastor Paul. The best material came from Paul’s mischievous wife Sarah, who laughed harder than anybody else in the room.

After the potluck lunch, Joy and Hope went home with their grandparents who came for the occasion. The girls were excited about swimming in their grandparents’ backyard swimming pool. When Paul and Sarah finally arrived home at the parsonage that afternoon, Paul opened up the envelope. Inside he found a check for \$6,543.

Paul showed the check to Sarah. She said, “That will buy one hell of a vacation!”

With that, Sarah and Paul went to their bedroom and engaged in some enthusiastic lovemaking. Afterwards they began to make plans for a trip to Hawaii.

Chapter 20

Hard Request

A few days after Paul's surprise four-year anniversary celebration at Grace, he called his friend Craig Frazier and told him all about the big event. During their conversation, Craig asked Paul about Tommy Branson's parents, Ted and Eva.

After Paul brought Craig up-to-date, he added, "After Tommy died, his partner Brad continued to attend church. Thankfully, Brad never contracted the AIDS virus. Given Grace's extraordinarily loving response to Tommy during his illness, Brad developed a strong loyalty to the congregation. Not long after Tommy's death, Brad became a member. He rarely misses a Sunday.

"For over a year now," Paul continued, "Brad has been inviting members of the gay community to Grace, and a good number of them have visited. We now have about two dozen openly gay members. Although they only represent a small minority of the congregation, they are growing in numbers and influence. Grace continues to welcome them, in spite of some congregational ambivalence about same-sex relationships."

Craig replied, "Although this subject can be controversial, and might eventually result in some congregational conflict, I'm glad to hear that Grace is welcoming people from the gay community. Keep me posted on your progress."

* * *

Several weeks after his conversation with Craig, Paul spoke with Brenda Bass, a member of the church council. Paul knew Brenda identified with the traditionalists in the congregation concerning homosexuality.

She told Paul, "I don't what to think about this anymore. The truth is, I'm conflicted. On the one hand, I don't want Grace to become known as a gay church. On the other hand, I want Grace to be a church that welcomes gays. Goodness knows, we all need a church family. But I still struggle to accept homosexual relationships."

* * *

About a year after Tommy's death, a young man named James Conrad began attending church with Brad. Soon thereafter he became a member. One day after church Sarah told Paul, "It's obvious to me that Brad and James have a serious relationship."

About six months after James joined, Brad and James set up an appointment with Paul at the church office. After some small talk, Brad told Paul the purpose of their visit.

"James and I have come here today to ask you an important question. We realize our request could put you in a difficult situation, and we apologize for that. But James and I love each other very much, and we want to make a formal and public commitment to each other.

"We obviously cannot get legally married, but we still want to exchange vows with each other. And we want to exchange our vows in our home church. We are both people of deep faith, we both love this church, so we hope to have our ceremony here. We want to know, can you and will you perform the ceremony for us?"

Paul, shocked by the request, responded honestly, "I'm not sure."

* * *

Early the next morning Paul went to visit Glen Hightower. He explained Brad and James' unusual request. Although Glen had progressive views about homosexuality, he realized how volatile this issue could become.

"I'm sure you are aware, Paul, that this could split Grace right down the middle. Most of our folks have no problem welcoming gay people into the congregation. But seeing two men walk down the center aisle of their church, exchange rings and vows, and then kiss each another in the sanctuary? That's a whole different story."

"I realize this will be a major challenge," replied Paul. "But it's also an opportunity to fully live out our identity as an open-minded, grace-filled, progressive congregation."

"But at what cost?" asked Glen.

“I’m not sure,” Paul replied. “But it won’t come cheap.”

In the end they agreed this decision could not be rushed. Instead, they decided to put together a task force to consider the request and its ramifications.

As Paul prepared to leave his meeting with Glen, he said, “I’ll have to tell Brad and James that it’s going to take some time for us to make a decision. However, they are aware of the high stakes, and I believe they’ll be patient with us.”

* * *

The following week, the church council created a task force to consider the request. Paul called Craig and told him all about the meeting.

“The council worked hard to select a diverse group of members by age, gender, race, tenure at Grace Church, theological persuasion, and sexual orientation. In all, twelve members were selected to review the request, study the broader issues, and bring a final recommendation to the congregation. It’s a pretty balanced group.

“However, Brenda Bass, whom you know, is a member of the task force. I’m sure she will advocate against granting the request. But I never expected this decision to be unanimous. The council knows a lot is on the line. We have to decide whether Grace will participate in the blessing of gay couples or not. And if so, what will be the consequences? It is, by any measure, a daunting task.”

“A daunting task indeed,” Craig replied. He didn’t say so, but he worried about how this would impact both his friend and the congregation.

* * *

The task force, co-led by progressive Glen Hightower and traditionalist Brenda Bass, decided to meet once a week for ten weeks. Several weeks into the process, Paul gave Craig an update.

“We began by getting to know one another better. Then we read numerous articles about homosexuality and faith. We’ve had honest and forthright dialogue.

“We are studying the handful of passages of Scripture that deal with the topic of homosexuality, along with conflicting interpretations of those passages. Sometimes the group engages in heated debate. But overall they seem to respect one another and want to make the best decision they can for the church.”

Craig asked, “Do you think the group will be able to come to a consensus on this matter?”

“I really don’t know,” Paul quietly replied.

After two more meetings, Paul realized an outside voice might help the process.

At the next gathering he said, “If it’s OK with the group, I’d like to invite an educator to one of our meetings who can help us frame the larger issues and facilitate deeper dialogue.”

Everyone agreed with Paul’s request. He knew exactly whom to ask.

Chapter 21

Fred's BBQ

Paul drove down several streets in the small town, looking for the restaurant. Finally, he saw the sign, "Fred's BBQ." *Pretty dumpy place*, thought Paul.

He parked his car, walked into the restaurant, and saw Bill sitting in one of the worn-out booths. Like Paul, Bill was a tall man, although heavier than Paul, with a dark complexion and thick, curly black hair. They hugged warmly, then sat down. "It's good to see you," Paul said.

"Same here," replied Bill.

"So how did you find this place?" Paul asked.

"One of my colleagues told me about it. Said it wasn't much to look at but they had great BBQ. When I looked at the map and saw that it was about halfway between us, I thought it would be a good place to meet."

"I hope so," Paul said as he warily looked around the restaurant.

After some small talk, Bill said, "Between the two of us, a lot has happened over the past few years."

"You're not kidding," Paul laughed. "I resigned Trinity, left the Southern Baptist Convention, and joined the United Church of Christ. You got fired for being a liberal, found a new teaching job, and became a Presbyterian. We've become downright ecumenical!"

* * *

Since his college days, Paul felt a kindred spirit toward Dr. Bill Sanford, who was only eight years older than Paul. After Paul's graduation, Bill and Paul's relationship evolved from a professor and student to best friends.

Rarely a week went by that the two men didn't talk on the phone or exchange letters. Whenever possible, they visited face-to-face, but the distance between them made it difficult. So both men were excited that they now lived only an hour apart and could see each other far more often.

As they waited on their BBQ order, Paul said, "Tell me more about your new position."

"Although getting fired was overwhelmingly painful," Bill explained. "I now have far more academic freedom. I feel liberated in many ways. In fact, I'm having more fun teaching than ever before.

"I also enjoy my new administrative responsibilities as director of Religious Studies. It's a small department, and the faculty enjoys a strong spirit of collegiality. Plus, Lisa and the kids love our new community. I think this will be home for us for the long haul."

"It sounds like you landed on your feet."

Bill smiled and said, "Yes, I guess I did. But that's enough about me. Tell me about this dicey situation at your church and how you think I can help."

Paul brought Bill up-to-date on the volatile dynamics at Grace, including James and Brad's request to have a gay union service at the church. "We've put together a task force to process the request.

"At our last meeting, they decided it would be helpful to bring in an outside facilitator. They gave me the green light to invite you to come and spend some time with us. If you can do it, we're going to block out an entire Saturday.

"We want you to give us an overview of the homosexual controversy in the American church, exploring the historical, biblical, and theological aspects of the debate. It's a diverse but good group, and they will actively participate in the conversation."

Bill immediately said, "I'd love to do it."

They set the date and then moved on to other topics.

After devouring a rack of the best ribs they had ever eaten, and after talking for almost two hours, the two men decided they would meet together for ribs and conversation on the last Friday of every month. Bill didn't teach Friday afternoon classes, and Friday was Paul's day off. Over the years, and after many hours of significant conversations, Fred's BBQ would become sacred ground for both of them.

After paying their bills at the cash register, they walked outside to the parking lot.

"Before we go," Bill said, "Tell me again about the ear thing you do with your kids. I'd like to try it with Anna."

Paul said, "How about I show you?"

"OK."

Paul stood face-to-face with Bill, just inches apart. He took him by the ears and said, "I love you. I bless you. And I think you're absolutely terrific." Then he laid a big kiss on Bill's forehead.

"I can't believe you just did that!" Bill exclaimed.

"You told me to show you!"

They both laughed loudly as they headed to their cars.

"See you a week from Saturday," Paul said.

"I look forward to it."

Paul got into his car. As he waved goodbye to Bill, he thought, *I do love you, and bless you, and think you are absolutely terrific.*

Paul whispered, "Thank you, God, for my friend."

As Paul began the drive home, he popped in side two of his Carol King Tapestry cassette tape and sang along with Carol on "You've Got a Friend."

Chapter 22

Three Options

Two Saturdays later Bill drove to Grace Church for the task force gathering. Paul began the day by sharing a devotional. In an effort to humanize the topic at hand, he told the story about the Communion service he held at the AIDS clinic two years earlier for Tommy, his roommate Jason, and the other patients. After an opening prayer, he introduced Bill and turned the program over to him.

As Paul expected, Bill did an excellent job leading the group. After some initial comments and group-building dialogue, Bill said, “Let’s dive into our agenda for the day. The truth is, American churches are not of one mind concerning homosexuality. Good Christian people vigorously disagree over this volatile subject.

“Although an oversimplification, Christians hold three major views concerning homosexuality. These three views are represented by the Christian right, the Christian center, and the Christian left. Let’s review all three.”

Bill wrote on a large blackboard:

1. *The Christian Right: Nonwelcoming and Nonaffirming.* — “The first major position on homosexuality can be found among the Christian right. Almost all conservative evangelical denominations are currently in this camp. This position can be summarized as *nonwelcoming and nonaffirming*. They base their position on a handful of biblical passages, which they believe unequivocally condemn homosexual behavior.”

Bill then added to the blackboard:

2. *The Christian Center: Welcoming but Nonaffirming.* — “The second major position concerning homosexuality, often found in the Christian center, can be summarized as *welcoming but nonaffirming*. This position is fully welcoming— all persons, including gays, are absolutely welcome into the church of Jesus Christ. However, this position is nonaffirming; it is not yet ready to affirm homosexual behavior, including hiring gay clergy, or performing gay unions at church.”

Bill went back to the blackboard and wrote:

3. *The Christian Left: Welcoming and Affirming.* — “The third major position concerning homosexuality can be found among the Christian left. This position, still a minority view in the American church, can be summarized as *welcoming and affirming*. This position makes a passionate case that the church not only needs to welcome gays into the church but that the church also needs to affirm loving, monogamous gay relationships.

“Based on my limited knowledge from my conversations with Paul, it seems clear that Grace Church rejects option one. There’s no question that gay people are welcome in your congregation.

“The best that I can tell,” Bill continued, “is that Grace is fairly evenly divided between option two: welcoming but nonaffirming and option three: welcoming and affirming.

“We are here today because Brad and James, along with your pastor, are asking Grace Church to fully move to option three: welcoming and affirming.”

That pretty well sums it up, thought Paul.

After a break, Bill drew attention once again to the three options listed on the board.

“As we noted earlier, option one is a nonstarter for Grace. People in this camp left your church long ago. So that leaves options two and three. For those of you comfortable doing so, I’d like you to share which of these two positions you currently support and why.”

Nobody spoke at first. Finally, Joyce Bradshaw said, “I’m willing to speak to this. It’s no secret to any of you that I’m a lesbian. My partner Sheila and I have been together for almost a decade. We both grew up in conservative evangelical churches. However, once we went to college, we both left church, primarily because of their condemnation of gay people.

“Sheila and I met several years after graduating from college. In spite of our painful church experiences during our youth, both of us still wanted to be part of a church family. We tried a few but never felt welcome.

“Then, a couple of years ago, we heard about ‘an open church for open-minded people,’ and we decided to visit. When we arrived, the congregation warmly welcomed us, including Pastor Paul. We immediately felt at home. We joined a few months later and have never looked back. We love this church and are grateful we found it.

“At this point, you probably expect me to argue for option three, welcoming and affirming. But ironically, to my surprise, I find myself supporting option two instead.

“I love Brad and James. Sheila and I are good friends with them. But I’m afraid if we approve this gay union, we’ll stir up a huge controversy at Grace and cause a lot of damage.

“I’m sure it’s selfishness on my part, but I don’t want to tear apart the church that Sheila and I depend on for our spiritual home. Over time I believe Grace will eventually get to option three. But as a person who has been rejected by the church my entire life, you need to know that option two—imperfect as it is—is a *huge* deal.

“Being welcomed and accepted for who I am means the world to me. I don’t want to risk losing that. So maybe it’s best to wait a little while longer before prematurely pushing the congregation to accept option three.”

Bill let the group take in Joyce’s comments for a moment. Then he said, “Does anyone else want to share?”

Adam Caldwell, a young man in his mid-thirties, said, “Although I understand and respect what Joyce is saying, I’d like to speak in favor of option three. Although I’m not gay myself, I feel the need to advocate for the growing number of gay people who are now coming to our congregation. Perhaps a story will help explain my position.

“When I was in junior high school, we had a kid in my school named Andy. A lot of my classmates constantly picked on him. He was different from the other boys, sort of effeminate, so some of the students began calling him a sissy. By high school they suspected he was homosexual, and their judgment got worse. They called him ‘homo, fag, queer’ and worse. They were merciless in their judgment.

“One day, during my junior year, right after gym class, five boys cornered Andy in the locker room shower and urinated on him. Afterwards they walked off laughing.

“Andy showered again, dressed, and made it through the rest of the day. But the damage had been done; the breaking point had arrived. That night Andy snuck out of his house, went to the high school, and broke into the gym. He found an extension cord in the coach’s office. Then he hanged himself in the shower where the boys had urinated on him that morning. The janitor found his body the next day.”

Several members of the group gasped, and numerous tears fell.

“I didn’t find out about the horrific stunt in the shower until after Andy committed suicide. And I never teased or bullied Tony myself. So technically, this awful event was not my fault. But I’ve always felt somewhat complicit in his death. Not because of what I did but because of what I *didn’t* do.

“I never stood up for Andy. I never challenged the boys who bullied him. I never offered him kindness or friendship. If I had, Andy might still be alive today.

“I think it’s time for Grace to stand up to the religious bullies who tell gay people they are an abomination to God and clearly say to them, ‘We are not going to stand for this abuse anymore.’ I think it’s time for Grace to rally around the gay community and say, ‘Regardless of whom you love, you are accepted by God, you are accepted by our church, and we stand with you. And, if you want one, we are honored to celebrate a gay union ceremony for you and your partner.’”

Adam continued, “I don’t discount what Joyce just said. She’s right. If we do this, we’ll

lose some people, just as we did when we welcomed Tommy back to church in spite of his AIDS diagnosis. But we need to remember—most of our folks did not leave. The vast majority of them stayed. And within a year we added a lot of new people, most of them with progressive theology.

“Yes, we’ll take a hit over this, but we’ll make it up and then some. And, even if we don’t, this is the right thing to do. Far worse things can happen to a church than losing members over doing the right and loving thing.”

Before they broke for lunch, several other members of the group shared their thoughts. They split fairly evenly between options two and three. By lunchtime it became clear to Paul, Bill, and everyone else at the retreat that Grace Church was nowhere near a resolution on this vexing issue.

Chapter 23

Bend or Break?

Paul felt nervous as he walked into the conference room. Tonight the task force would make a final decision on Brad and James' request. *But it's far bigger than that. This is about our core identity and our future as a congregation.*

As chair of the church council, and cochair of the task force, Glen called the meeting to order. Everybody knew the stakes.

"Brenda and I decided we would begin by sharing our personal thoughts with the group."

Over the next few minutes, Glen shared his reasons for supporting Brad and James' request. Brenda then shared her reasons for not supporting the request. Paul already knew Brenda opposed the request, and the vote would not be unanimous.

"Does anybody else have anything to add?" asked Glen.

Nobody spoke. Glen said, "I'm going to ask our pastor to share his final thoughts on the matter and then we'll take the vote."

Paul passionately argued that Grace should grant the request. He concluded, "When we bless heterosexual unions but refuse to bless homosexual unions, we make our gay members second-class citizens. It's patently unfair and goes against our core values as an open-minded and grace-filled congregation.

"On the other hand, if we grant this request, we make all of God's children in our church equal, and we live up to our best instincts and values. As your pastor, I strongly encourage you to approve this request by our brothers in Christ, Brad and James."

Glen said, "Does anybody else want to say anything?"

After a long moment of silence, Glen said, “I think we’re ready to vote.”

Brenda responded, “I think we should vote by secret ballot. That way everyone can vote his or her conscience without worrying about what other members of the group think.”

Although Paul didn’t like it, the group agreed to take a secret ballot.

After everyone turned in their ballots, Glen and Brenda carefully counted the votes.

Glen paused a moment, then shared the results. “Six in favor of the request, five against, and one abstention.”

Paul was devastated.

After a long silence, Glen said, “Technically, the motion passes. But clearly we are not of one mind on this. Pushing the church to make a decision at this time is fraught with risk.”

Joyce Bradshaw, who spoke at the retreat a few weeks earlier, said, “I think all of you know that I love Brad and James. And, as a lesbian, I certainly want to stand with the gay community.

“But as I said at our Saturday retreat, taking this action at this time could do great damage to our church. I love this congregation, and I don’t want to see that happen. Perhaps we should put this issue aside for a while and revisit it again in the future.”

Several other members of the group shared similar feelings. A consensus was clearly building. Paul’s frustration intensified by the moment.

Glen finally said, “Paul, I know you want this. So do I. But I think Joyce and the others make a good point.”

Brenda then added, “The fact is, Grace is not yet ready for this.”

Paul went ballistic.

“I can’t believe what I hear all of you saying. I’m fed up with the church of Jesus Christ saying, ‘We are not yet ready for this.’”

“When abolitionists demanded that Southern churches denounce the evils of slavery, the church said, ‘We are not yet ready for this.’

“When Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders asked Southern churches to join them in the Civil Rights Movement, the church said, ‘We are not yet ready for this.’

“When gifted and called women sought to serve the church as clergy, the church said, ‘We are not yet ready for this.’

“And now, when gay children of God who love Jesus, and love one another, ask the church to bless their love, just as the church does for everyone else, the church says, ‘We are not yet ready for this.’

“So I want to know,” shouted Paul as he slammed his fist on the table. “When the hell will the church ever be ready to do the right thing?”

Paul abruptly stood up and said, “I’m deeply disappointed with all of you.” With that he picked up his notebook, stomped out of the conference room, and slammed the door behind him.

The task force group didn’t know how to respond. They had never seen their pastor behave like this. It stunned them all. For years, even in difficult circumstances, Paul always kept his composure and handled himself diplomatically.

Finally, after a long moment of awkward silence, Glen said, “It seems to me the wisest course of action is to table the motion for the time being. I’ll get back to Paul after he

cools down, and we'll talk about what's next."

Everyone in the group concurred with Glen's recommendation. Just as they prepared to leave the room, the conference door opened, and Paul walked back into the room.

"I owe all of you an apology."

Later that night, Paul called Bill. "You won't believe what just happened." For the next twenty minutes, Paul vented to his friend.

When Paul finally came up for air, Bill said, "Paul, have you ever seen the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*?"

"Are you kidding me?" Paul replied. "I'm pouring out my guts to you, and you want to know if I've ever seen *Fiddler on the Roof*?"

"Hear me out," Bill replied. "Have you seen the play?"

"I've seen the movie."

"Then you remember the multiple scenes of Tevye, the devoted Jewish farmer who says, 'On the one hand . . . on the other hand.'"

"Yes, I remember."

"When his first daughter wants to marry a poor tailor, Tevye says, 'On the one hand, he's only a poor tailor. . . . On the other hand, he is an honest and hard worker.' In the end Tevye gives his permission for them to marry.

"We then see a similar scene play out when his second daughter falls in love with a politically minded radical. 'On the one hand. . . . On the other hand.' The scene ends with Tevye sending his daughter off on a train to Siberia to be with the man she loves."

"So what's the point?" Paul impatiently asked.

“I’m almost there.”

Bill continued the story. “Finally, Tevye’s third daughter falls in love and wants to marry. However, this time, it’s not a poor tailor or a radical political thinker. This time, it’s a Gentile, a non-Jewish Christian. This is more than Tevye, a lifelong devoted Jew, can tolerate.

“For a moment, Tevye tries to be open-minded. He says to himself, ‘On the one hand, my daughter loves him. On the other hand, how can I turn my back on my faith, my people? If I try and bend that far, I’ll break. On the other hand. . . . No! There is no other hand.’”

Bill then said, “Paul, I understand your frustration. But you’ve asked your church to bend too far on this one. If you push them too hard on this right now, they won’t just bend; they will break. I know you don’t want to hear this again, especially from me. But the hard truth is, Brenda is right. They aren’t yet ready for this.

“However,” added Bill, “This is not the last chapter of the story. These are good folks. You’ve said so yourself, over and over again. Eventually they will come around. Be patient with them. Just because you’ve lost this battle doesn’t necessarily mean you’ve lost the war. Give it some more time.”

Although Brad and James were unhappy with the decision to table their request for a ceremony in the sanctuary, they didn’t leave either. As they explained to Paul, “We appreciate you too much to walk out on you. And, in spite of its imperfections, we also love Grace Church. We’re here for the long haul.”

During Paul’s tenure, Grace Church never held a gay union ceremony, at least on the church campus. However, Glen eventually brokered a compromise.

Paul told Bill about it at their next lunch at Fred’s BBQ. “Glen got the church leaders to agree that I can perform gay ceremonies but not on church property. Although the agreement certainly doesn’t satisfy me, it’s sure better than nothing.

“So last week I officiated at my first gay union. The ceremony was for Brad and James. We held it in the back yard of the Bransons’ home. Ted and Eva have always loved Brad like a son, even after Tommy’s death. They cried throughout the ceremony, both tears of joy and sorrow.”

* * *

Years later, in the summer of 2015, long after he left Grace and resigned from ministry, Paul received a phone call from an old friend.

“Paul, this is Glen Hightower from Grace.”

“Good to hear your voice, Glen. How are you doing?”

“I can’t complain much. What about you, Sarah, and the girls?”

“We’re all doing fine.”

Glen said, “I have some news I want to share with you. A few months ago, just a couple of weeks after the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage, Grace celebrated a gay wedding. The proud couple was Brad and James. I found out today it was the first gay wedding in the state held at a church. The ceremony, celebrated in the sanctuary, was packed with members of the Grace congregation. I thought you’d like to know.”

Paul couldn’t help but smile.

Chapter 24

First Stone

Bill ordered for both of them. “We’ll share a full rack of ribs with fries and slaw. Please add an extra side of beans and corn on the cob.”

“And bring two glasses of sweet iced tea,” added Paul.

“We probably sound like an old married couple ordering for each other,” laughed Bill.

“I suppose we do,” replied Paul.

“OK,” said Bill, “I need some help.”

“What kind of help?”

“The United Methodist Church in my town has a female pastor. Great person. You would like her. Anyway, she’s expecting a baby in about two months. As soon as the baby comes, she’s going to take a three-month maternity leave. Last week the church asked me to fill in for her during her absence. I don’t have to do any pastoral care work or administration. They just want me to preach on Sundays for those three months.”

“So, what did you say?”

“I agreed to do it. But since then, I’ve had second thoughts. I mean, I give class lectures all the time. But preaching sermons? I’m not sure I’m up to the task.”

“Of course you are,” replied Paul. “You’ll do great. I’m excited for you.”

“So tell me how to prepare a sermon.”

“That’s a pretty broad subject!”

“OK, to start with, where do you get your sermon ideas?”

“The short answer is—from everywhere. I get ideas in my devotional Bible readings or the weekly lectionary passages. I get ideas from books I’m reading, both fiction and nonfiction. I get ideas from movies and music. I get ideas from current events. I get ideas from conversations from other people. Ideas are everywhere. You just have to pay attention.”

Paul continued, “This week I got my sermon idea from a cartoon.”

“A cartoon! You’re going to have to explain that one.”

“You are familiar with the cartoonist Doug Marlette. He does the Kudzu cartoons about the Southern preacher. We’ve talked about his cartoons before.”

“Yes, I absolutely love his work,” said Bill.

“This week I came upon one of his cartoons I’ve not seen before. In the first panel of the cartoon, the preacher stands before a crowd. He quotes the words of Jesus in the story about the woman caught in adultery: ‘He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone.’

“In the next panel, the entire crowd plummets the preacher with rocks. In the final panel of the cartoon, he’s completely covered up with stones. Speaking from under the pile of rocks he says, ‘Dang Moral Majority.’”

Bill laughed loudly.

“Exactly!” said Paul. So, I decided right then and there to preach a sermon this Sunday on the sin of judging other people. And my target was going to be the self-righteous, arrogant, religious-right, Moral Majority type people who drive me nuts with their judgment against gays, liberals, communists, pro-lifers, evolutionists, and all the other evil sinners. I was going to let them have it. But then I hit a major snag.”

“What snag?” asked Bill.

“I went back and read the text from John 8. And when I did, I realized that I was the arrogant, self-righteous, judgmental person who needed to be chastised by Jesus.”

“Tell me what you mean,” said Bill.

“You know how angry I felt a few months ago when the task force declined Brad and James’s request to have a gay union ceremony at the church.”

“Yes, I can’t remember you ever being that upset before.”

“Mostly I felt angry toward Brenda Bass, who led the opposition. She resisted the idea from the get-go. She got other people to weigh in against it with every member of the task force. She spoke against granting the request right before the vote. And then, to top it all off, she spoke the words that blew my gasket, ‘Grace Church is not yet ready for this.’”

“I remember the story well,” said Bill.

“Since then I’ve held a terrible grudge against her. I’ve seen her as a hyper-traditional, provincial, closed-minded, homophobic, backward-thinking fundamentalist. I’ve been judging her without mercy since the vote. I’ve been casting the first stone against her again and again. I’ve stood in total self-righteous judgment upon this woman.

“But, as I read the story in John, I began to see that the problem is not Brenda but me. She is a decent human being who loves God, loves her church, and loves other people, including Brad and James. She is simply not on the same page as I am about homosexual relationships.

“Plus, she was trying her best to avoid a massive and damaging conflict at the church. I’ve been all wrong about her. Anyway, I started off preparing a sermon to blast Brenda and other judgmental conservatives, but, after reading the words of Jesus, I ended up

preaching a sermon to myself.”

“Jesus can be downright inconvenient, can’t he?” said Bill, laughing while he spoke.

“Yes, he can,” chuckled Paul.

“So, tell me all about the sermon.”

“I have a better idea. When I get home, I’ll mail you a copy. And, since you are interested in where to find preaching ideas and how to construct a sermon, I’m going to send you a disk of the sermon manuscripts I’ve preached over the past year at Grace. You can look them over at your convenience. If nothing else, you might find a few ideas and some stories you can use.”

“That would be fantastic,” said Bill.

“But the offer only stands if you pay for lunch.”

“You’ve got a deal.”

* * *

That Sunday morning, right after the liturgist read the story about the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11, Paul stood before the congregation and began his sermon. The title of his message, listed in the bulletin, said: “The End of the Stone Age.”

Paul said, “When you came into the sanctuary today, you should have been given a stone. It’s important that everyone have one. If you did not receive one, please raise your hand, and our ushers will throw one at you as hard as they can! Just kidding, they will gently hand you one. For now, hold on to your stone, and we’ll come back to it later.”

With that, Paul began his sermon on not judging other people. Mostly he just walked through the story from John 8 and made a few comments along the way.

When he got near the end, he said, “It’s time for me to wrap up. Before I do, please get the stone that we gave you earlier in the service.”

“Hold it in your hand.”

“Think of a person or a group of people that you tend to judge.”

“Get that person or group clearly in your mind.”

“Then remember the words of Jesus, ‘He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone.’”

Paul concluded, “Today Jesus is asking us to relinquish our tendency to judge others. Today Jesus is asking us to drop our stones of condemnation and leave the judging to God. If you are willing to do that, then this is what I’d like you to do.

“In just a moment, Kim is going to sing a solo of a fairly new song called ‘Let There Be Peace on Earth.’ As many of you know, the song says, ‘Let there be peace on earth and let it begin in me.’”

“As she sings, I’m going to ask you to take that stone, walk to this altar, and leave the stone behind. By doing so you are saying to God, ‘Lord, I’m going to leave the judging of this person or group of persons to you. Lord, I relinquish my stone.’ If you are willing to do that, please do so now as Kim sings.”

With that, Paul picked up the stone he laid on the pulpit at the beginning of his sermon. He walked to the altar, thought about Brenda Bass, set the stone down, went back to his pulpit chair, and sat down. As Kim sang “Let There Be Peace on Earth,” a large number of people in the congregation began to come forward with their stones.

Brenda Bass led the pack.

Chapter 25

Meeting God at the Movies

In mid-January 1996, Bill and Paul gathered for their monthly lunch.

“I’m starving,” said Bill.

“Me too,” Paul replied.

Angie, who had been taking lunch orders from Bill and Paul for over four years, smiled and said, “Hello Gentlemen, I assume you want the regular.”

Bill said, “You assume correctly!”

Angie pulled out her pad of paper and wrote: rack of ribs, fries, slaw, corn on the cob, baked beans, and two sweet teas. “I’ll bring it out soon,” she said.

“So,” Paul began, “the question of the day is, Where do you experience God in the world?”

Question of the day became a regular for Bill and Paul several years earlier.

Bill said, “It sounds like a trick question.”

“It’s not.”

“OK,” said Bill, “I experience God through nature, relationships with other people, Scripture, prayer, worship, and service to others. I assume these are correct answers.”

“They are,” replied Paul.

“So, where do you experience God in the world?” asked Bill.

“The same places you just listed. But I’d add another item to the list.”

“What’s that?” asked Bill.

“Through movies,” said Paul. “I find that some of my most profound transcendent experiences occur through film.”

“I would agree with that,” said Bill. “Two years ago Lisa and I went to see *Schlinder’s List*. It deeply moved me. On the one hand, it raised the endless question of why suffering exists in the world. You can’t find a more horrific example of suffering than the Holocaust.

“Yet, on the other hand, it reminded me that even in the worst circumstances of life, God still works through human beings, as he did with Oskar Schindler, who saved the lives of more than one thousand Polish Jews by employing them in his factories during World War II. Last semester I showed this film to one of my classes, and we discussed its theological implications. It proved a powerful experience for my students.”

Paul said, “*Pulp Fiction* served as an epiphany for me last year.”

Bill laughed and said, “You’ll need to explain that one.”

“In the movie,” Paul said, “Samuel Jackson’s character kills a bunch of people. Right before he shoots them in cold blood, he quotes a passage of Scripture to them from the book of Ezekiel, ‘I will strike thee down with great vengeance and furious anger.’”

“I remember those scenes well,” said Bill. “The crazed look in his eye, combined with the menacing words from Ezekiel, terrified me. So, you found God in these scenes in *what* way?”

“I’m just messing with you,” laughed Paul. “But it was a wildly provocative movie.”

“To be sure,” replied Bill.

“Paul then said, “I loved *Forrest Gump*. I found his simplicity, humility, kindness, authenticity, loyalty, and transparency deeply refreshing. Surely God admires these kinds of traits in people. I could easily preach a sermon, ‘The Gospel according to Forrest Gump.’ OK, your turn.”

Bill replied, “Lisa and I just watched *Apollo 13*.”

“So did Sarah and I,” replied Paul.

“Then you know the Apollo 13 astronauts were just about to perish in space. People all over the world prayed for them. The Pope even said a special mass on their behalf. Remarkably, they survived. But God didn’t save them through a supernatural miracle.

“Instead, God saved them through human instruments. God used the wisdom, skills, and persistence of dedicated engineers and scientists to get them safely home. I used that story in my class to illustrate the theology of incarnation—that God works in the world primarily through human beings.”

“I like that,” said Paul, “I’ll have to use it in a sermon one day.”

“OK, it’s your turn,” said Bill.

“Last weekend, while looking for a movie at the video store, I came across a film called *The Shawshank Redemption*. Have you heard of it?”

“No, I haven’t,” replied Bill.

“You’re going to want to see it,” said Paul. “It’s a prison film, so it has dark moments. However, it moved me to the core of my being. I experienced God’s presence as I watched it. In fact, I’d have to say that it’s my new all-time favorite movie.”

“Why?” asked Bill, curious to hear Paul’s reasoning.

“Because, even in the mist of all the darkness in that prison, a powerful message of hope prevailed. In fact, I’m going to use the story in this week’s sermon. After last week’s brutal storm in the east that killed more than 150 people, plus some recent local and congregational tragedies, I figure my congregation, including me, could use a word of hope.”

“I’ll rent it this weekend,” said Bill.

* * *

Paul began his sermon that Sunday by briefly referencing numerous recent tragedies: international, national, local, and congregational. He acknowledged the darkness they brought. “But,” he argued, “for Christian believers, darkness, death, and destruction are not the last word. Instead, we belong to a God who brings life out of death, including the death of a loved one, the death of a marriage, or the death of a dream.

“The last word of the gospel is not death. Instead, the last word of the gospel is hope.” After developing his theme of hope, Paul concluded by telling his congregation about *The Shawshank Redemption*.

“Two weeks ago, I watched a profound movie called *The Shawshank Redemption* starring Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. *The Shawshank Redemption* tells the story of a young bank executive named Andy Dufresne. Andy, falsely convicted of murdering his wife and her lover, was sentenced to two life terms in a notoriously brutal state penitentiary called Shawshank Prison.

“While there he met a black man named Red, and the two struck up a unique friendship. It’s a long and complex story, but ultimately it’s a story about affirming hope in a place where little hope existed.

“In spite of being an innocent man in a tough prison, Andy held on to hope—hope of escape and hope of life beyond prison walls. And that hope is what kept him going.

“Andy’s dream was to go to a little Mexican town on the Pacific Ocean called Zihuatanejo. His plans included buying and running a hotel, including fixing up an old

boat to take his guests deep-sea fishing. He once asked Red to be his assistant, but Red said he didn't think he could make it in the outside world. A few minutes later Red chastised Andy for holding on to such a fairly-tale pipe dream.

“In one of many powerful scenes in the movie, Andy talked with his friends about the need for hope, especially in prison. Red, angry by Andy's naïve words of hope, said, ‘Let me tell you something, Andy Dufresne. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It's got no use on the inside of prison.’

“But Andy didn't buy what Red said. Andy continued to hope, even after twenty hard years at Shawshank prison. And Andy didn't just have hope for himself; he also inspired hope in others. For example, he helped young men get their GED, and he built a first-class library for the inmates. In the end Andy even inspired hope in his dear friend Red, the one who said hope was a dangerous thing.

“After spending twenty years in Shawshank prison for a crime he did not commit, Andy finally escaped. Not long after Andy's escape, Red found himself paroled. But Red wasn't adjusting well to life outside prison. In fact, he almost decided to commit a crime so he could return to the security of prison life.

“However, one thing kept him from implementing that plan. Andy left Red a letter, inviting him to come to Zihuatanejo to help him run his hotel. In the letter Andy said to Red, ‘Remember, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.’

“And so, with hope in his heart, Red decided to go to Mexico. As he traveled on the bus, excited as a schoolboy, Red spoke the final words of the movie. He said, ‘I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope.’

“Like the gospel of Jesus Christ, the final word of *The Shawshank Redemption* is the word hope. In the final scene of the movie, Red and Andy are reunited on the beach at Zihuatanejo. And so it was, that through the power of hope, Red was finally redeemed.”

Part Two

Losing My Religion

Chapter 26

Uncomfortable Visit

“I appreciate your taking time to visit with me,” said Jenny, a long-term member at Grace, as she sat down in Paul’s office.

“I’m glad to do so,” replied Paul. “I always enjoy having conversations with our members.”

“You probably won’t enjoy this conversation.”

“Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“It’s difficult to put into words. But I’m having serious doubts about my faith.”

“You’re not alone,” said Paul. “Christian believers have experienced times of doubt since the beginning. Most of us, at one time or another, can relate to the man who said to Jesus, ‘Lord I believe; help my unbelief.’”

“I haven’t believed in a long time,” replied Jenny.

“Tell me more about it.”

“It’s hard to say how it all started. Years ago I began to realize that I don’t believe all this religious stuff anymore. Take Christmas for example. A virgin birth. Angels singing in the sky. It all sounds like a fairy tale, right up there with Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the tooth fairy.

“I have similar feelings about Easter. All the miracles seem incredulous to me. And every Sunday, when we recite the Apostles’ Creed, I cringe inside. I simply can’t believe these traditional doctrines anymore.”

“I’m sorry to hear about this struggle,” said Paul. “It must be painful.”

“It’s not like I decided to stop believing,” Jenny said. “I didn’t purposely reject my faith. It just slowly eroded and seems gone now. I can’t conger it back up, regardless of how much I try.”

“What does your family think about this?” Paul asked.

“I haven’t told them. I’m a fourth-generation member at Grace. I can’t bear to tell my husband or my grown children that I can no longer believe.”

Paul said, “This is not unusual, Jenny. People go through times of doubt all the time. Even Jesus, hanging on the cross cried out, ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’”

“But his doubt was temporary,” said Jenny. “My doubt never ends. I keep waiting for my faith to return, but it doesn’t. I come to church every Sunday. I sing the songs. I say the prayers. I recite the creed. I listen to the sermons. I take Communion.

“But it means nothing to me. I feel absolutely nothing. Every day I try to pray, but the words get stuck in my throat. I haven’t felt God’s presence in my life for years. It breaks my heart to feel this way,” Jenny said as tears began to roll down her cheek.

They sat in silence for a while.

Paul asked her, “Have you thought about leaving church?”

Jenny said, “I’ve been a member of Grace my entire life. I got baptized here as a baby. I married here. John and I baptized our three children here. My grandchildren have been baptized here. My mom and dad had their funerals here. I can’t imagine leaving. Plus, I love the people in this congregation. The friendships I have in this place mean the world to me. I don’t want to leave. But I can’t believe anymore.”

Paul finally said, “I’ll tell you what. How about you let us believe for you right now? In time perhaps your faith will return. And if not, you can still have faith in Christian friendship.”

“Thank you, Pastor Paul,” Jenny said as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Let’s talk about this again before long,” Paul said. “Meanwhile, I’ll keep our conversation confidential. Would it be OK for me to pray for you?”

“Yes,” Jenny said, “I would appreciate it.”

Paul took Jenny’s hand and said, “Dear God, I pray for your beloved daughter Jenny. Thank you for her honesty today. She wants to believe but cannot at the moment. So give her the grace to endure this dark night of the soul. Hold her close. Encourage her through the love of her family and friends and church family. We ask these things in the name of Jesus, who loves us even when we are unsure of our faith. Amen.”

They both stood up. Paul gave Jenny a hug, and she walked out of the office.

Later that night Paul wrote in his journal:

May 22, 1996: I spoke to a longtime member today who has lost her faith. She didn’t choose to lose it. She didn’t want to lose it. But she lost it nonetheless. I could empathize with every word she said. In many ways she articulated my own doubts. It frightened me to hear her story. I’m afraid it’s becoming my story.

For example, I find myself wondering, Does God really providentially care for the world? The daily news suggests otherwise. So does our unused nursery plan at the parsonage.

Is God really a personal heavenly father? I’ve not related to God like that for awhile.

Is Jesus fully divine? Did he really walk on water, give sight to the blind, rise from the dead, and ascend into the sky? I wonder.

Does God perform miracles? I’ve never seen one.

Does prayer make any difference? It doesn’t seem like it, at least not very often.

These are not good questions for a clergyperson to ask. But I grapple with questions like this all the time. And I have no idea where these unwanted questions will ultimately lead.

I want to be a person of faith more than anything else in my life. But holding on to faith is becoming more difficult. As the father with the sick child said to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, "Lord I believe; help my unbelief."

Paul sat quietly in his chair for several minutes. He walked to his stereo system, looked at his album collection, then reached for one he hadn't listened to in a long time. He pulled *Clouds* out of the cardboard cover and placed it on the turntable.

He located "Both Sides Now" on the album, placed the needle on the song, and listened to Judy Collins sing about life's many ambiguities. Although he could not yet predict the details, Paul felt deep in bones that his life was on the verge of significant change. The feeling scared him.

Chapter 27

Caves and Canoes

At their next lunch meeting at Fred's BBQ, Bill said, "For years now I've listened to you talk about your good friends Richard and Sandra. I want you to tell me how you first became friends."

Paul said, "It's kind of a long story."

Bill said, "I have all afternoon."

"Well," Paul began, "Richard and Sandra and their two children began attending Grace five years ago, soon after I arrived. Neither of them had been to church since graduating high school.

"During their college years they gave up on their conservative childhood faith, believing it to be hopelessly dogmatic and closed-minded. After they married, they never got around to looking for an alternative religious option. They mostly lived a secular life."

"However, both of them still had a vague sense of God and faith. They also had two young children. They wanted their children to belong to an open-minded community of faith where they could develop important friendships and be rooted in substantive values.

"So, when they heard stories in the community about 'an open church for open-minded people,' they decided to check us out. They immediately liked our progressive theology, and they seemed to resonate with my preaching and leadership.

"Three months later, when Tommy was diagnosed with AIDS and I realized I needed some professional help to deal with it, I reached out to Richard, who specializes in infectious diseases. He and his wife Sandra, who is a pharmacist, immediately agreed to help educate the congregation. Through that process Sarah and I became immediate friends with them."

“Sarah and I have a lot in common with them. We both have two children. And we hold similar theological and political views.”

“So you’re telling me they are theologically liberal and that they belong to the Democratic Party!” joked Bill.

“I’ll plead the Fifth on that one,” laughed Paul.

“Anyway, both Sandra and Sarah have advanced degrees in science, with Sarah teaching chemistry and Sandra working as a pharmacist. Richard used to be a member of the Baptist Church. We both left the Southern Baptist Convention and joined the UCC for similar reasons, so we have that in common. And, although Richard works as a physician and I serve as a minister, we both chose vocations serving others.”

“The main difference being,” added Bill, “is that he makes a lot more money than you!”

“To be sure,” laughed Paul.

“Anyway, the good chemistry among all four of us became evident as we worked on the AIDS education project for Tommy Branson. A few weeks later, when we all gathered for a cookout at the Moselys’ house, and the kids immediately connected and played well together, a significant friendship was born.”

With that, Paul and Bill went on to other subjects, mostly theology, their favorite topic.

* * *

On his drive back home from lunch, Paul thought more about the close friendship that had developed between his family and the Moselys.

After the family cookout Paul told Bill about, the two families continued to get together on a regular basis. Every two weeks or so, they gathered for a meal, took a day trip together, or went to the movies. About six months later, their relationship took a major step forward.

At lunch one day Sandra said to Sarah, “Richard and I have rented a cabin on the lake

for the second week of June. The cabin is huge. All eight of us could easily fit with room to spare. So, we were wondering, would you and Paul and the girls like to join us?”

“It sounds wonderful to me,” said Sarah. “Let me talk to Paul tonight, and I’ll get back with you tomorrow.”

When Sarah broached the possibility with Paul, he said, “Absolutely!”

The lake event proved a huge success with swimming, water skiing, and cooking on the grill. Every night, even with the heat, they built a campfire and cooked marshmallows on sticks. The next year, they went to Disneyland.

“Although the parents weren’t wild about the destination, all four children loved it. The following year they took a trip out West and saw the Grand Canyon. On their next trip they went to Niagara Falls. By now the two families had become the best of friends.

At one point their friendship became a bit of a problem for Paul. A member of the congregation complained about it to Glen Hightower. She said, “Our pastor is playing favorites by having such close friends in the church.”

Glen and Paul decided to immediately lean into the problem at the next council meeting.

“It’s been brought to my attention,” said Glen, “that at least one member of the congregation is unhappy about the close friendship between our pastor’s family and the Mosely family. I’ve asked Paul to speak to this.”

Paul said, “While I always respect our members’ opinions, I must respectfully disagree with this one. If Sarah and I don’t have friends in the church, where will we find them? Our social life is focused almost exclusively on this congregation. It only makes sense that we’ll have friends here.”

Paul continued, “There is plenty of precedence for pastors having close friends within the church. In fact, you don’t have to look any further than Jesus. Although he had twelve disciples, he had an inner circle of three—Peter, James, and John—who were his best friends among the larger group.

“Jesus needed intimate friendships for support, so he didn’t hesitate to have a few close friends among his flock. Our friendship with the Mosely family is exceptionally important to my family. I don’t mean to be rude or stubborn, but we are not going to forfeit that relationship just because somebody in the congregation doesn’t like it.”

After further discussion, the council unanimously agreed with Paul, and they decided to put this concern aside for good. Glen spoke for the entire group when he said, “As long as it doesn’t adversely impact his work here, it’s nobody’s business whose Paul’s friends are.” Everyone agreed.

In 1996, for their fifth consecutive summer excursion, the Grahams and the Moselys decided to stay closer to home and pick a vacation spot somewhere in the South. Sandra did extensive research on possible options. At their next dinner together, she made her pitch.

“My sister lives in northern Arkansas, and she says there are wonderful vacation venues in that area.”

“Arkansas?” Sarah replied with a skeptical voice.

“Hear me out,” said Sandra with a strong tone of confidence. “You’re going to love what I’ve come up with.”

“First, we can rent a couple of cabins at Buffalo River State Park. The river is beautiful. The water is calm in the summer so it’s safe for the children. And the canoeing is great. I know how much you and Paul and the girls love to canoe together.”

“This is beginning to sound promising,” Paul replied.

“It gets better,” said Sandra. “After the canoe trip, we can head to Blanchard Caverns State Park. They have huge and fantastic cave formations. People come from all over the country to go on the underground tours. The kids will love it. And for Sarah, it will be a chemistry teacher’s dream!” Sarah was already convinced.

“But wait,” said Sandra with excitement. “There’s still more! This part is especially for Paul. After we spend a day or two canoeing down the Buffalo River, and after we visit Blanchard Caverns, we can drive to a quaint little town called Eureka Springs. They have all kinds of fun attractions.

“Plus, every summer they put on a huge passion play based on the final week of the life of Jesus, with hundreds of actors and real animals. Thousands of people from all over the world flock to see the play every summer.”

“Sold!” exclaimed Sarah.

The next day all the reservations were made. Both families looked forward to the trip with great anticipation.

The trip exceeded their expectations. As Joy said afterwards, “It was the best vacation ever.” Hope got a bee sting, and Joy tipped over in her canoe, but in spite of these minor causalities, both families had one of the best times of their life.

At the end of the week, immediately after the passion play was over, they headed back to the hotel to prepare for the trip home the next day. Everyone raved about how impressive the presentation was. Paul didn’t say anything contrary to the glowing reviews. However, deep inside, something troubled him.

The next evening, after they arrived home, Paul reflected on the experience in his journal.

August 17, 1996: Instead of feeling inspired by the passion play, I thought it felt contrived, campy, and cheesy. The angels, earthquakes, and miracles. The

dead people coming out of their graves. The resuscitated corpse of Jesus. And worst of all, the ascension of Jesus up into the sky.

It all seemed like a fairy tale. The supernatural elements throughout the story seemed unreal and unbelievable to me. Like Sarah, maybe I don't believe in all of the "hocus pocus" of Christianity after all.

As he had done many times before over the past few years, Paul put these threatening thoughts out of his mind. Although he mostly held them at bay for the next several years, they would not stay boxed up forever.

Chapter 28

Week from Hell

Three years later, in December 1999, the ringing telephone on his bedroom nightstand woke Paul from his Sunday afternoon nap.

“Paul, this is Andrea Scott. I’m sorry to bother you at home on a Sunday afternoon, but we have a situation at the hospital.”

Andrea, an active member at Grace Church, served as a nurse in the children’s ICU wing at Central Hospital.

She continued, “Julie Scarborough delivered her baby a little while ago, a boy. He’s struggling with serious complications. Julie and Stewart are beside themselves. I think it would be helpful if you could come and see them, the sooner the better.”

“I’ll be right there,” Paul replied.

On the drive over, Paul thought about the Scarborough couple. For years Julie and Stewart tried to have a baby. Finally, after multiple fertility treatments, numerous disappointments, several miscarriages, and lots of money later, Julie became pregnant. The entire congregation celebrated the news and waited in anticipation for the arrival of their newest member.

“It doesn’t look good,” Andrea told Paul as he walked into the children’s ICU. “The baby has several life-threatening problems. Doctor Savage doesn’t think the boy will make it. As you might guess, the Scarboroughs feel devastated.”

Paul walked into their ICU room.

“It’s good to see you Pastor Paul,” Stewart said. Julie tried to speak but could not get beyond her tears.

“They have him on life support,” Stewart explained. “But they say his chances of survival are not good.”

Julie finally found her voice. “Please pray for our son!” she desperately cried out.

Several hours later, Paul left the hospital and drove home. The medical team decided to keep the baby on life support overnight and evaluate his condition the following day. By the next afternoon it became clear the situation was hopeless. Julie and Stewart, along with Dr. Savage, made the painful decision to remove all life-support systems. Paul, present during the conversation, reassured the grieving parents it was the only viable option.

Julie, holding her infant son, and knowing he would not live past the next hour said, “Pastor Paul, would you please baptize Jason before we remove life-support?”

“Of course,” Paul replied.

Andrea roused up a cup of water for the baptism.

Paul pulled out his pocket New Testament and read from Matthew 19, “Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and bless them. . . . Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these’” (Matt. 19:13–14 NIV).

Paul, Julie, Stewart, and Andrea recited Psalm 23 together, and then prayed The Lord’s Prayer. Paul placed his hand over the water and said, “Eternal God, our heavenly Father, bless this water and this precious child who receives it.” He took a small amount of the water, placed it on the infant’s tiny head and said, “Jason, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Paul took the small container of olive oil he carried to the hospital for anointing, placed some of the oil on his thumb, made the sign of the cross on Jason’s forehead, and said, “We commend your spirit to God, who graciously receives his beloved children to himself.”

Andrea looked at Paul. He nodded. It was time. She turned off all the life support machines. Within a few minutes the tiny baby quietly died. The only sound coming from the room was the wailing cry of Julie as she held her dead son in her arms, “Oh my God, why?”

On his drive home about an hour later, Paul’s only thought was, *Where in the hell is God?*

* * *

Paul spent the next day preparing for the graveside service of baby Jason Scarborough. On Tuesday morning at the cemetery, Paul, Julie, Stewart, other family members, and close friends gathered together for the brief and sad ceremony. Pastor Paul concluded, “We commit to the ground the body of Jason Scarborough, and we commend his spirit to God’s gracious and loving care.” Watching the funeral home workers lower the tiny casket into the ground was almost more than Paul could bear.

After the funeral Paul went home for lunch, but he didn’t have an appetite. Work had piled up over the past few days, so he returned to the church office. Late that afternoon, about 4:30 p.m., Paul received a call at the office. “Pastor Paul, there’s been a terrible accident. You need to come to the emergency room.”

The entire congregation loved Tony Andrews, a high school junior and active member at Grace. His natural leadership ability, handsome looks, keen intelligence, and empathy for others all pointed to an exceptionally promising future.

That afternoon, on his drive home from school, Tony got broadsided by a pickup truck. Soon after he arrived at the hospital, the ER doctor pronounced him dead. When Paul arrived at the ER, Tony’s lifeless body still lay in the ER trauma room, surrounded by his parents and other family members.

The sight of this beautiful young man lying dead on the gurney with fatal wounds to his body made Paul sick. Tony’s parents proved inconsolable. Paul wondered, *What do you say to parents of a teenager less than an hour after his violent death in a car wreck?*

He attempted some pastoral words and said a prayer, but it felt futile to him.

The next few days brought a flurry of activity for Paul as he tried to comfort Tony's family and the traumatized youth group and prepare for the funeral of a seventeen-year-old boy. They held his service three days later on Friday afternoon.

Paul decided not to preach a sermon that Sunday morning. For one thing, the dual tragedies of the week did not allow time for sermon preparation. However, far more important, the congregation needed a different approach.

Given the overwhelming trauma the congregation felt, a routine service would not be adequate. Paul decided to tell a brief story, followed by Holy Communion, which, in Paul's theology, was as close as people could get to Jesus this side of eternity. *God knows our congregation needs Jesus on this particular Sunday.*

After a Scripture reading about the suffering and death of Jesus, Paul stood up to speak to his heartbroken and devastated church. "A few years ago, I heard a story about a man named David whose fourteen-year-old son died in a tragic accident.

"Several days after the funeral, David, in agonizing grief, drove to a Roman Catholic bookstore. There he purchased a wooden crucifix, depicting Jesus suffering on the cross. David drove home, opened his toolbox, and grabbed a hammer and nail. He then walked to the kitchen and hammered the crucifix to the wall, right above his son's empty chair at the dinner table.

"Every evening, when he stared at Rob's empty chair, David lifted his eyes to the crucifix and remembered that God, like him, had suffered great grief. The crucifix did not explain his son's death. Nor did it take away the pain of that death. But knowing that God suffered *with* him allowed David to survive that horrible time of pain and grief. Years later that crucifix still hangs on David's wall. It reminds him that the God of the cross is always with him, even in his deepest suffering."

After a few comments about the tragic events of the week, Paul led his congregation in the liturgy and sacrament of Holy Communion. He barely got through the service without breaking down. He could not remember a sadder Sunday in his life.

That afternoon, Paul wrote in his journal,

December 12, 1999: Lots of people told me how meaningful today's service was given the horrific circumstances of the week. I'm glad it proved helpful to the congregation. The story I told about the grieving father and the crucifix used to mean a lot to me. But today it didn't offer me any comfort at all.

I don't want a God who impotently suffers with his children. I want a God who prevents babies from dying in their mother's arms in the ICU and who protects seventeen-year-old boys from being wiped out in automobile accidents.

It wouldn't take much. Just a tiny change in the development of a fetus. Just a foot on an automobile brake for a few seconds. That's all it would take. You would think that an all-powerful, all-loving God could pull off something like that. You would think so. But you would be wrong.

"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."

Paul placed his journal back in the drawer. With Sarah and the girls out, the house felt empty and quiet. He walked to his record collection at the stereo system. He picked up Out of Time by R.E.M. and placed it on the turntable. He put the needle down on "Losing My Religion."

Chapter 29

God on the Gallows

The next Friday, when Paul met Bill at Fred's BBQ, he said, "Last week was, without a doubt, the worst week I've ever experienced in pastoral ministry."

Bill, who already knew about Paul's awful week from their previous phone call a few days earlier, quietly listened to his friend's pain.

Paul said, "I'll go to my grave hearing the wailing cry of Julie in the children's ICU, holding her dead baby boy in her arms. It was beyond horrific. Then I heard that same primal cry from Tony's mother in the ER, hugging the dead body of her teenage son. I felt impotent to make any difference, to offer any comfort, to add any meaning to such cruel events.

"And to make things worse," Paul continued, "these deaths are only two tiny inconsequential specks in the overwhelming suffering that occurs around the world every day. A few weeks ago, I read a story in the paper about a man, a husband and father, mowing his lawn.

"He hit a rock, and it flew up and hit a wasp's nest. He received several hundred wasp stings and died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, a totally random and unnecessary death.

"Last week I heard about a family who capsized in their boat. As the young daughter sank under the water, her mother begged God to save the child. But the child drowned anyway. Someone ought to ask that mother what she thinks about God's providence. And every day on the evening news, stories abound about famine, war, natural disasters, and other examples of massive suffering."

Paul continued. "Sarah is currently doing some research on infectious diseases. She told me that in the twentieth century alone, smallpox, a horribly painful and disfiguring disease, killed 300 million people. 300 million!

“How could God allow such horrific suffering to occur? And, far closer to home, in my own congregation at this very moment, we have dozens of good Christian people who love Jesus dealing with cancer, dementia, and marital trauma. The list goes on and on. All the while, God does absolutely nothing.”

Bill decided not to interrupt. Instead, he carefully listened to his deeply distraught friend.

Paul then added, “Ironically, just yesterday, my daily devotional came from Matthew 10, where Jesus says God takes notice of every sparrow that falls to the ground. Jesus teaches us that God cares about little birds dying.

“But they just keep on falling to the ground, don’t they? It’s just one fricking dead sparrow after another! I’m tired of preaching about a loving providential God while sparrows, babies, and teenagers fall to the ground, one after another.”

Paul, just about out of control, finally stopped himself. “I’m sorry, Bill. I didn’t mean to go on such a rant. I can’t remember ever feeling like this before.

“I’m so angry and so sad at the same time. Burying a two-day-old infant and a seventeen-year-old teenager in the same week will do that to a person.” Paul’s eyes filled with tears as he thought once again about Jason and Tony and their mothers’ inconsolable cries of unrelenting pain and grief.

Once again Paul said, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK,” said Bill. “I completely understand. You don’t have to apologize for anything. I wish I had an answer for you but I don’t. As you well know, the problem of suffering is the major challenge to Christian faith. Theologians call it the “theodicy” problem. You and I have talked about it many times before.”

“I know we have,” replied Paul. “But somehow it feels different now. It’s not just the events of last week, horrible as they were. This is a long-term theological and faith problem for me.

“For years now, I feel like I’ve been witnessing the slow death of providence. Clearly, in this universe of overwhelming and brutal suffering, both in the natural world and in human history, God does not providentially care for creation in any traditional sense.

“Just watching the news for one week would convince any objective person that God does not intervene to protect people. And if that is true, it calls into question our entire theology of a personal, loving God who cares for all of creation. Instead, it all feels random and oftentimes cruel.”

Bill said, “Unfortunately, I understand how you feel. Last year I taught a class on faith and the problem of suffering. We read several books, including the book of Job in the Old Testament, along with a small book called *Night*. Have you read that before?”

“No, I don’t think I’ve heard of it.”

“Elie Wiesel wrote it. Wiesel, a Jew, is a survivor of the holocaust.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of him,” replied Paul. “I saw him interviewed on public television once, a remarkable man and interview. But I don’t know much about his story.”

Bill said, “During his teenage years, the Nazis imprisoned him and his family at Auschwitz, the infamous concentration camp. Other than himself, everyone in Elie Wiesel’s family perished in that brutal and demonic camp. In his book *Night*, Wiesel tells a harrowing story from his experience at Auschwitz.

“The story involves a hanging that the guards forced him and all the other prisoners to witness. The Nazis hung three men, one of them just a teenage boy, accused of blowing up a power station. In order to warn the other inmates of the high cost of resistance, they forced all the inmates to walk by and stare at the execution at close range, a grisly scene of death, evil, and suffering.

“By the time Wiesel marched by, the two adults had already died. But the youth, still alive, hung on the gallows, struggling between life and death. Behind him Wiesel heard

a man ask a question: 'Where is God now? Where is he?'

"The execution continued. The lad lingered on. Once again Elie heard the man ask, 'Where is God?'"

"Elie Wiesel said, 'I heard a voice within me answer him: Where is God? He is there—hanging on the gallows.'

"In his book," Bill continued, "Wiesel does not give any further interpretation of that story. But many people believe he implied that it's no longer possible to believe in God after the horrors of the Holocaust—that somehow God died in the death camps.

"I've thought a lot about that story over the years, and I must confess I have no answers. Like you, I struggle with the conflicting ideas of a loving and providential God who watches over creation and protects his children—and the massive suffering in the world. I've thought about it hundreds of times, and I still don't see any way to resolve the problem.

"However," added Bill, "I still find great meaning in the cross, knowing that God suffers along with humanity. And I constantly see God at work, responding to tragic events, through the response of human compassion."

Paul said, "I don't disagree with you. When tragedy comes, I often speak about the crucified God who joins us in our pain. And I tell people to look for God not in the suffering but in the caring response to the suffering. But I want more than a suffering God and loving human response. I want God to prevent suffering in the first place."

The two men sat in silence for a while. They had barely touched their food.

In an attempt to break the somber mood with some levity, Paul finally said, "Aren't we in a cheery mood today!"

Bill laughed, "Yes, we certainly are."

They finally set aside their discussion on the problem of suffering, and began to eat their lunch while catching up on their families and their work.

* * *

As Paul drove home that afternoon, he could not get the image of the Holocaust hanging out of his mind. He thought about the Jewish man in the camp watching the horrific execution of a teenage boy and asking, "Where is God?"

Where is God indeed? Paul wondered.

Chapter 30: The Death of Providence

Over the next few months, Paul, on almost a daily basis, reflected on the doctrine of providence. He began with some general research. As he explained to Sarah, “The working definition of *providence* is ‘the protective care of God.’ Theologians speak about two different kinds of divine providence: general and special.

“*General* providence,” Paul told Sarah, “is God’s continuous upholding of the natural order of the world. *Special* providence is God’s protective intervention in the lives of people. The irony, at least in my mind, is that providence is a given in Christian theology.

“Christians through the ages have just naturally assumed that God providentially cares for the world. It’s a bedrock belief of traditional faith. However, I see no evidence of providential care in the real world. Instead, literally on a daily basis, I see constant evidence to the contrary.”

Paul tracked his thoughts about providence in his journal over several weeks in the spring of 2000. He concluded each entry with the haunting question of the Jewish holocaust prisoner at the Auschwitz hanging, “Where is God?”

Last night in our city a family of six died in a house fire, including young children, all of them active members at First Pentecostal Church.

“Where is God?”

I visited Madge today at the nursing home. A former English teacher, she used to enjoy a keen mind and sharp wit. She and I were close. When I gave her Communion today, she tried to eat the plastic cup. And then, as I left, she said, “Young man, would you please tell me again who you are?”

“Where is God?”

I read more of Sarah’s research on infectious diseases. The facts are beyond

brutal. In 1918 alone, a global influenza pandemic hit, killing one out of every thirty people on the planet. One in thirty!

Billions of people have died through the ages from the flu, malaria, measles, smallpox, Guinea worm, polio, and such simple things as diarrhea and pneumonia. The horrendous pain and suffering caused by these diseases over the centuries is more than I can begin to comprehend.

And each casualty was somebody's son or daughter, mother or father, brother or sister, husband or wife. Each one had a story, dreams, hopes. Why would a good, caring, and powerful God ever allow such suffering to occur? It makes no sense. None! And, on top of that, you can add the ravages of famine and war, which have created suffering beyond comprehension.

"Where is God?"

I watched a nature show on public television this week. It featured a story about beautiful red crabs on an island in the Pacific. But when the crabs hatch from their eggs, almost none of them survive. As soon as they hatch, their instincts tell them to head to the beach and safety of the water.

But, as they move that direction, aggressive ants attack them and eat their eyeballs so they cannot see what direction to go. Then the ants eat their brains and other soft tissue, leaving thousands of dead crabs in their wake.

Why would a loving, providential God create such carnage? And this is just one microscopic example of the overwhelming brutality of nature. It hardly fits with the hymn, "This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought, of rocks and trees, of skies and seas; his hand the wonders wrought."

"Where is God?"

A few days ago, I read that over 95 percent of all species that ever lived on the planet are now extinct. 95 percent! Why would God create all those species just to kill them off in the evolutionary process, which is brutal beyond imagination?

“Where is God?”

Last night, storms hit several states, with massive flooding and a large number of tornadoes. More than two dozen people died. Tonight, on the evening news, a reporter interviewed a survivor of the storm.

He said, “God protected me and my family and saved us from the storm.” But that raises the question—Why the hell didn’t God protect and save the two-dozen people, including children, who violently died in the storm?

“Where is God?”

Tonight, as I thought about the storms that hit a few days ago, I remembered an incident from Hope’s childhood. It occurred on a stormy night. The lighting and thunder woke her up. Hope, only four years old at the time, felt afraid and called for Sarah.

But Sarah was out, so I went in to comfort her. She wanted to see the storm, so I turned on the outside deck light, and through the window we watched the rain fall and then the hail hit.

She held me close and asked, “Are we safe?”

I replied, “Yes, we are safe.”

And it was true. We were safe from the rain and the hail. But the bigger truth is that we are not safe, none of us, regardless of our faith in Jesus. We are not safe from cancer, accidents, heart attacks, disease, violence, crime, divorce, unemployment, addiction, or any other threats.

God clearly is not in the business of providential care anymore, if he ever was.

“Where is God?” I’m not sure. But he sure as hell isn’t protecting anybody.

A few weeks later, Paul decided to write a sermon on the subject of providence. His working title was “Redefining Providence.” He worked on it for many hours. In the sermon he suggested that in the late twentieth century Christian believers needed to redefine their understanding of God’s providence. Instead of thinking of it in terms of

God's *protection*, he argued, we need to redefine it to mean God's *presence*.

"In other words," Paul wrote in his sermon, "while God does not *us protect* us from suffering, God promises to be *with us* in the midst of our suffering. That's what Psalm 23 means when it says, "Yea, though I walk *through* the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art *with* me." It sounded nice on paper, Paul thought, and he even had a moving story to illustrate his point.

But then Paul thought about how the sermon would sound to the parents of Jason, the infant boy who died in the ICU. Or how it would sound to the parents of Tony, the teenage boy killed in the car wreck. Or how it would sound to his friend Jack Wakefield, a minister in another town, whose wife got raped the previous year while he attended a church youth event.

Or how it would sound to the Griffin family who just learned that their young daughter has leukemia. And he realized, the sermon would sound like trite religious platitudes to them.

Paul pulled out a black magic marker from his desk drawer, took his sermon manuscript, and harshly marked through the title, "Redefining Providence." He wrote above it in large bold print, underlining each word, "The Death of Providence."

Then he threw the sermon manuscript into the trash can.

Chapter 31

Hell House

Lisa, youth minister at Grace, stood at Paul's office door and said, "Pastor Paul, do you have a moment?"

"Certainly, come in and have a seat."

"First," said Lisa, "there's nothing you can do to fix this problem. I just need somebody to hear me vent."

"I'm good at listening to people vent!" Paul joked. "So, what's on your mind?"

"Have you heard about the alternative Halloween haunted house at First Baptist?"

"A little but not much. Why don't you tell me about it?"

Lisa said, "A couple of days ago, I had lunch with a group of three other youth pastors in town. We've become an informal support group. I've mentioned them to you before."

"Yes, I remember," said Paul.

"We began to talk about the Halloween event at First Church. They call it 'Heaven's Gates, Hell's Flames.' We all call it 'Hell House.' All four of us have young people in our youth groups who attended the production this week, and many of them left deeply disturbed. So we all decided to attend last night's program. To call it horrific is a massive understatement."

Lisa explained, "In the drama two teenagers die in a car wreck and face their eternal destiny. The boy, who didn't accept Jesus in this life, goes into the flames of hell, with red lights symbolizing fire, along with a sinister Satan figure and cries of agony and pain. The girl, who did accept Jesus, goes to heaven and is greeted by a white-robed Jesus and a chorus of angels."

“Then,” she continued, “an altar call is given, asking people, especially young people, to walk forward and get saved in order to get their ticket to heaven while avoiding the fire and fury of hell. I’ve never seen such a manipulative hack job in my life. It literally made me sick.

“Like I said,” Lisa added, “I know you cannot control this. It’s not like you can shut down a production at the biggest church in town. I just needed to talk to somebody about it.”

Paul paused for a moment, then said, “In pastoral counseling classes at seminary they teach you never to say, ‘I understand how you feel.’ But I understand how you feel!”

Paul reached back over a decade and called forth a memory from his days at Trinity Baptist Church.

“I had been at Trinity Church for about four years,” said Paul. “The denomination had just released a new film called *The Burning Hell*. It featured people being tortured in the flames of hell with worms crawling in their eyes, followed by an invitation to get saved in order to avoid such a horrible fate.

“It was billed as a great evangelism tool, especially for children and youth. Not knowing any of the details, I went to see an advance review of the film. Just like you, the toxic theology, plus the religious manipulation of children, disgusted me.”

Paul continued, “A few days later, a denominational representative called the church office and said, ‘Brother Paul, when can we schedule *The Burning Hell* at Trinity?’ I politely declined to set a date. The man persisted. ‘This is the best evangelism tool our denomination has created in decades. Surely you don’t want to miss out.’ Finally, I’d had enough.”

“Hell will freeze over before I schedule your twisted and manipulative film at my church.”

Lisa said, “You actually said that!”

“Yes, I actually did.”

They both laughed.

“Lisa, we cannot stop sick religion. It abounds today, especially in the evangelical South. All we can do is try to offer a healthier alternative.”

“Thanks Pastor Paul,” replied Lisa. Then she added, “Since so many of our youth have seen ‘Heaven’s Gates, Hell’s Flames’ this week, I’ve decided to talk with them about it this Sunday during their Sunday school class. Can you join me?”

“I’ll be there,” said Paul. “Unless hell freezes over first.” Lisa laughed so hard she almost cried.

That evening, Paul received a phone call from Stewart Long, one of his old seminary friends. Like Paul, Stewart struggled with the fundamentalist movement in the SBC. However, unlike Paul, he decided to remain a Baptist. He currently served a church in Arkansas. About once a year, the two men touched base on the phone.

It had been fifteen months since their last conversation. They talked almost an hour, catching up on work, family, and denominational politics in the SBC and UCC. Paul thought the conversation had about come to an end when Stewart told him a troubling story.

“Last September,” Stewart said, “I asked our deacon board if we could host a community-wide ecumenical Thanksgiving service. They agreed, and we presented it at the October churchwide business meeting. The proposal passed without incident.”

Stewart continued, “Seeing an opportunity to strengthen the strained racial relationships in my town, I invited every church in the community to the service, including the black congregations. I even asked one of the black pastors to preach the

sermon. A few days later, several men from the congregation marched into my office, visibly upset.

“One of them said, ‘We hear you invited black churches to attend the Thanksgiving service.’

“‘Of course I did,’ I replied, ‘After all, it’s a community-wide service.’

“They demanded, ‘On whose authority did you make those invitations?’”

“‘The congregation’s authority. Just two weeks ago at our business meeting, the church unanimously approved that we host a community-wide Thanksgiving service.’

“One of the men angrily responded, ‘We thought you meant the *white* community.’

“Although the men insisted that I disinvite the black churches,” Stewart said, “I stood my ground. The Thanksgiving service went on as planned and provided a beautiful moment of rare racial harmony. However, the negative response among many in my congregation deeply disappointed me.

“The incident cost me the support of a lot of people. And it’s only getting worse. Since the Thanksgiving service, a group of disgruntled members constantly criticize me at every opportunity. My wife is totally distraught. She’s afraid I’m going to be fired. And she has good reason to worry. The tide seems to be turning against me. I don’t think I can survive here much longer.”

Paul offered support the best he could, although there wasn’t anything he could do other than sympathize. As he listened to Stewart’s painful story, Paul grew more and more angry with Stewart’s congregation and with the church in general, which seemed so out of sync from the spirit, example, and teachings of Jesus.

After he got off the phone, Paul told Sarah about his conversation with Stewart.

“That’s horrible,” she said.

“It certainly is,” Paul replied. “But it’s not unusual. Churches almost never live up to their ideals. Hypocrisy reigns in most churches. We never seem to get it right. And, on top of that, there’s always pettiness, politics, and never-ending criticism of the pastor and staff. Even at Grace, which is a pretty good place, the staff and I still get plenty of grief. Church work can be so overwhelmingly disheartening.”

By now Paul was in an extremely foul mood. The conversation with Stewart brought up long-felt frustrations with institutional church life.

Paul told Sarah about the “Hell House” at First Baptist Church. Then he went on a long rant about the massive failures of organized religion, both historically and currently. He finally concluded, “The whole church enterprise seems like one giant hell house. Surely this is not what Jesus had in mind.”

Although Sarah listened carefully, she didn’t say much. But she couldn’t help but think, *This sounds like a man who isn’t going to last much longer in pastoral ministry.*

Chapter 32

The Scale

“So,” Paul immediately said to Bill after they ordered lunch, “I have a new metaphor for the church.”

“What’s that?” Bill asked.

“Hell House,” said Paul.

“I think I like the apostle Paul’s metaphor ‘the body of Christ,’ better.”

Paul told Bill all about “Heaven’s Gates, Hell’s Flames.”

“Yes,” said Bill, “A church in my town did the same production this year at Halloween. I think churches did it all over the country. It sounds pretty awful.”

Paul, more serious now, said, “I’m only halfway joking about the hell house metaphor.”

“Tell me more,” said Bill.

“As you know, I’ve had a lover’s quarrel with the church since I first started attending as a teenager. But it’s feeling more and more like a quarrel without the love. I’m so weary of toxic religion. And it seems to be getting worse all the time.

“The arrogance, ignorance, and judgmentalism of the religious right grow every day. And my beef with the church isn’t limited to Protestant evangelical Christianity.

“For example, look at the Roman Catholic Church in Africa. They tell millions of their faithful followers that using condoms or other birth control methods is sinful in the eyes of God, resulting in a massive AIDS epidemic, not to mention keeping women in perpetual poverty.

“It’s impossible to get an education or raise your standard of living if you continue to have baby after baby. Rejecting birth control is a surefire way to keep women impoverished. All to keep the Catholic Church membership rolls growing. But the bigger tragedy is that this kind of bad religion is nothing new. It’s been around since the beginning.

“For example,” said Paul, “you could start with the awful theology, like that hell house production. What kind of sadistic God would torture people in flames of agony for all eternity? Even for the worst offenders, that would be completely out of proportion for their sins.

“Billions of years of torture for maybe seventy years of sinful living? No judge in America would approve of such a disproportional penalty. Even worse is the idea that God will fry people in hell for all eternity simply for not having the right doctrinal beliefs about Jesus. That’s a revolting thought. Still, an eternal fiery hell is a common belief held by huge numbers of Christians.”

Bill interrupted, “I don’t know, Paul. A lot of people no longer believe in a literal hell. I doubt many people in my denomination actually believe that.”

“Maybe so,” Paul said, “But a lot of folks do, especially in the evangelical church. But the doctrine of hell is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to religion and violence.

“For example, the major event of the Old Testament is the Exodus story, where God sent horrible plagues on all the people of Egypt, most of whom were innocent, including killing off the firstborn son of every family. That’s pure genocide. Although I don’t believe it literally happened, it’s still an awful image of a bloodthirsty, violent, and genocidal God.

“And the main event of the New Testament is the bloody death of Jesus. The church has taught for centuries that God would not forgive our sins without torturing and killing off his own Son. That’s divine child abuse if you ask me.

“Our hymnals are full of blood atonement language like, ‘Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?’ and ‘There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel’s veins, and sinners washed beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.’ These songs are absolutely revolting to me.”

“You’re certainly in a good mood today,” kidded Bill.

“I haven’t even got started yet,” replied Paul.

“Before you continue,” said Bill, “Let me remind you that plenty of Christians reject such unhealthy theology, including you and me, the members of your congregation, your own UCC denomination, along with plenty of others, including mine.”

“I know. But tons of Christians do believe in awful doctrines.”

“And,” continued Paul, “my frustration with the church goes far beyond toxic beliefs. Our history is even worse. You know the story. After the church closely identified with the Roman government in the early centuries, it became corrupt, and that corruption never ended.

“You see it in the inquisition, where people were tortured to death for having wrong theological beliefs. Then, conveniently for the church, all their assets were confiscated, leaving their families impoverished.

“You see it in the crusades, where literally millions of people were murdered, all in the name of Jesus. You see it in religious wars throughout the middle ages.

“I read recently that thirty million people have died in religious conflict over the years. Whether that number is accurate, I don’t know. But massive numbers of people have died fighting over issues like papal authority and the literal meaning of ‘This is my body and this is my blood.’”

Paul continued, “You see the church’s corruption in its support of the decimation of

Native American peoples and culture. You see it in its fostering of anti-Semitic attitudes that contributed to the Holocaust. You see it in the church's support of women's subordination.

"You certainly see it in the history of slavery. Christian slave owners beat their male slaves on Friday, raped their female slaves on Saturday, and then put on their fine clothes and went to church on Sunday to listen to songs and sermons about the love and mercy of Jesus.

"You see the deep corruption of the church in the Jim Crow South, where church people openly attended lynchings of young black men whose only crime was to look at a white woman. Some of them took photos of the events, smiling like they were attending a picnic.

"You see the corruption of the church as it—with few exceptions—fought against civil rights. You see it today in its unrelenting condemnation of gay people.

"It's also evident in the inexplicably ignorant rejection of global warming among evangelical Christians, with destructive results for the entire planet. It just never ends. It seems to me that the story of the church is one long hell house."

"That's not quite fair," replied Bill. "You know that's not the whole story. The church has also done a lot of good, including massive amounts of charity work."

"I know that," Paul said, "but it's also done a huge amount of damage. You and I saw it firsthand in our old denomination. A small group of powerful men, who loved power and the Republican Party more than Jesus, came up with a devious plan to take over the Baptist denomination.

"They stacked the deck of every committee and board in the denomination with hard-core political and theological conservatives, who then systemically purged everyone in denominational work who held moderate or progressive views. Then they quickly became heavily involved in partisan politics.

“For all practical purposes, our old denomination is now a political action committee for the far right of the Republican Party. For God’s sake Bill, the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention cost you your job! It’s the reason I left. And many of our colleagues who got wounded in that war never recovered.”

“I agree, it was brutal,” said Bill. “But I have to differentiate between the leaders at the top who did that and the rank-and-file people in the pews, who did not. Many of those people, most of them in fact, did not engage in such mean-spirited behavior.”

“That’s true,” Paul conceded. “However, they watched it happen. They let it happen. And they did nothing to stop it. They sat in their pews as their national leaders, in the name of religious purity, engaged in ruthless ecclesiastical power politics and decimated a once beautiful denomination. I can’t let the people in the pews off the hook completely.”

Paul continued, “I never told you much about my student pastorate during seminary. I suffered a lot of wounds at that place during my three-year tenure. Yes, many good people attended that church. And I had some fine experiences there. But I constantly got hammered by members who said I didn’t preach enough about hell or getting saved. Or I didn’t believe in an inerrant Bible.

“When I spoke on biblical topics like race or poverty, people said I was meddling in politics and needed to get back to true religion. Numerous members said my preaching wasn’t biblical enough. Some complained that Sarah wasn’t as active in church leadership as she should be.

“The ongoing criticisms and condemnations were frequent and painful. At one point I almost decided to quit seminary and forget about the ministry. But I was so close to graduating, I decided to press on. And then, near the end of my tenure at Trinity, I got hammed all over again with that same load of crap. Church people can be mean as hell.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in hell,” Bill kidded.

“You got me on that one,” Paul laughed. “But you know what I mean. Churches can be brutal to their pastors and staff.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t refute that,” Bill conceded.

Paul then told Bill the story about his Baptist pastor friend Stewart Long from Arkansas and the conflict over his inviting blacks to the community Thanksgiving service. “This kind of church shit just never ends,” Paul exclaimed.

“But what about Grace?” Bill said. “It’s a great church. You say so all the time.”

“Yes, it is,” replied Paul. “If you count college and seminary, I’ve worked at four churches, and Grace is by far the best of the lot. But even Grace is far from perfect. As you know, lots of our members left because we offered hospitality to a gay man with AIDS. And I deal with pettiness on a regular basis, like the woman who complained that I was playing favorites by being friends with the Moselys.

“I could tell you dozens of other stories about similar complaints and criticisms. And, to this day, we will marry heterosexual couples in the sanctuary, but we will not bless a gay couple there. They have to go off campus somewhere where nobody can see them. It’s our current version of sitting in the back of the bus in the 1960s.

“Listen, I know Grace Church is a good place. But it’s a far cry from what it should be. And that’s my entire point. When you look at the huge sweep of church history, you might say the church is a two-thousand-year-old version of a hell house.”

“I think you are being too hard on the church,” said Bill. “Like all human institutions, the church is flawed. But through the centuries the church has done enormous good as well. And it’s given countless number of people hope and meaning in their lives, including you. I’ve heard you say, more than once, that the church ‘saved you in every way a person can possibly be saved,’ and that ‘you would be completely lost without it.’”

“I know the church has done many good things,” replied Paul. “The history is not all bad, not by a long shot. And you are right, on a personal level, the church has given me many gifts. But I’m weary to the bone with toxic religion. Clearly, what the church has been in the past, and what it has become today, is not what Jesus intended.”

“I’ll grant that we fall far short of Jesus’s ideal,” conceded Bill.

Paul continued, “There’s a woman in my congregation named Lucy. She’s ninety-six years old. Fine woman. I love visiting with her. But, as you might guess, her life has become hard. Her once healthy body is falling apart. She lives in constant pain. Her husband died. One of her children died, and another is seriously ill. Almost all of her friends are dead.

“She told me several weeks ago, ‘On the grand scale of my life, there’s been a lot of good, and there’s been a lot of bad. But it feels like the bad side of the scale is about to outweigh the good. When the scale tilts to the bad, I don’t want to live anymore.’

“Of course, she doesn’t have control over that, although she probably should. We treat suffering animals better than we treat suffering people, but that’s another topic for another day.

“My conversation with Lucy has haunted me for weeks. I keep thinking about her metaphor of a grand scale, with good on one side and bad on another, and I’ve been applying it to the universal church. On the one side, Christianity has done a lot of good. There’s no denying that. But on the other side, there’s been a horrific amount of bad. If you put the bad and good on a scale, I’m not sure which way it would tip. My guess is that it’s about equal, about 50-50.

“So this is my dilemma I’ve lived with for over a decade. Do I spend the rest of my life serving an institution that is, at best, 50-50 on the good/bad scale? That question haunts me every day of my ministry.”

Bill responded, “I understand your frustrations, Paul. I have plenty of my own. But

I choose to live out Paul's challenge in Philippians 4 when he said, "If anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." In spite of many failures, the church still does incredible good in the world, and I think we should focus on that."

"I'm trying," replied Paul. "But it's getting harder all the time."

On his drive home from Fred's, Paul placed his John Lennon cassette tape into the player. He sang along on Lennon's most famous song, "Imagine." Paul rewound the song and listened to it again. Then once again.

* * *

Over a decade later, after Paul left the ministry, news began to break about a worldwide epidemic of pedophile priests who molested, abused, and raped hundreds of thousands of children all over the globe, including the United States. And, to make it even worse, bishops systematically covered it up, sending pedophile priests to parish after parish to rape even more children, all to protect the religious institution rather than the vulnerable children in their care.

Virtually nobody—not the offending priests or the bishops who covered it up—were ever held accountable for their heinous behavior. When Paul read the stories about this evil development in the Roman Catholic Church, he thought about the words of Jesus that it would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around your neck than to hurt a little child.

And then, in 2016, 81 percent of white evangelical Christians voted for the most anti-Christian president in American history. Regardless of his blatant disregard and crass violation of every virtue known to Christianity, they continued to support him overwhelmingly, with dire consequences for both the nation and the world.

In short, they valued partisan politics far more than they valued Jesus and his clear example and teachings. For decades, the evangelical church in America preached about family values, godly living, and Christlike character. But then, in exchange for a few scraps of political power, they jettisoned all their core values.

This disturbing reality, in Paul's opinion, completely destroyed any credibility the white evangelical church in America still had.

The 50-50 good/bad scale of the church has tipped to the bad side, Paul concluded, deeply saddened by the thought.

Chapter 33

Christmas Truce

During his early years of ministry, Paul loved Christmas. He enjoyed decorating the sanctuary. He took joy in the children's programs. He sang the carols with gusto. He especially reveled in the annual Christmas Eve candlelight service.

But in December 2000, planning for Christmas Eve felt more like a battleground than joyful preparation for a great celebration. He struggled to make meaning out of things he could not believe, including a virgin giving birth to a baby, angels singing in the sky, wise men seeking a newborn king, and a star hovering over the little town of Bethlehem.

He wasn't sure what he actually believed anymore about "the Word becoming flesh." And he felt disillusioned by the two-thousand-year-old unfulfilled promise of "peace on earth, good will toward men."

How do I make peace with all of this? Paul asked himself as he worked on his message for Christmas Eve. He felt like Ebenezer Scrooge shouting "humbug" while everyone else exclaimed "Merry Christmas!" He couldn't remember a Christmas season so filled with professional struggle, personal angst, and internal conflict.

In spite of this battle, Paul knew he had to plan a quality and meaningful service. Like most churches, Christmas Eve was the highlight of the year at Grace Church. Even with two services, the sanctuary could barely hold the overflowing crowds. However, as he tried to prepare a Christmas message he could preach with integrity, Paul felt totally stuck.

And then, out of the blue, Paul received an unexpected windfall. It ended up being his best Christmas gift of the season. About a week before Christmas, a letter arrived at the church office. Inside he found a photocopy of a magazine article. At the top of the page Paul found a short, handwritten note.

Paul,

I came across this true story in a magazine a few days ago. I thought you might enjoy it. Perhaps you could use it in a sermon. Sandra and I look forward to our dinner on Friday.

Richard

On Christmas Eve, 2000, in the packed sanctuary of Grace United Church of Church, after all the opening songs, readings, and prayers, Paul stood for his annual Christmas homily. He looked at the faces of the crowd, and began his comments.

“Two days before Christmas, a woman frantically shopped for her last-minute gifts. She had her four-year-old daughter in tow. The woman dragged her daughter from store to store. Exhausted, in a rush, and fighting the crowds, the woman felt more irritable by the minute. Finally, they made their last stop.

“As they walked out of the store, the mother said to her daughter, ‘Did you see that? That man at the checkout counter gave me a mean face.’

“The daughter said, ‘No mommy, you had a mean face before you went into the store.’”

After everyone laughed, Paul said, “Instead of being a joyful season, Christmas can sometimes feel like a battleground. And speaking of Christmas and battlegrounds, I want to tell you a Christmas story a good friend recently shared with me. It’s a true story from the brutal days of World War 1.

“Way back in the year 1914, on Christmas Eve, while much of the world fought that terrible war, an interesting event happened on the western front. It was miserably cold, with temperatures below freezing, and snow all over.

“On that Christmas Eve night, all across the German lines, lights begin to appear. At first, the British army expected the Germans to attack. But, instead of rifle fire, sounds of singing drifted across no-man’s-land. To their great surprise, the British soldiers

could hear the German soldiers singing 'Silent Night.'

"In response, the British soldiers decided to sing a Christmas carol of their own. This singing of Christmas carols went on, back and forth, for some time. After each song, the opposing troops applauded the other side's singing. Eventually, the troops began lobbing food into the opposing trenches.

"Then several soldiers erected makeshift Christmas trees. In the darkness, you could see candles burning on the branches.

"The next morning, on Christmas Day, a few soldiers poked their heads above the trenches. But nobody fired a shot. One German captain stepped out into no-man's-land, the land between the trenches. Not a round was fired.

"Then a British officer did the same. The two men met each other face-to-face in the middle of no-man's-land, introduced themselves, and saluted each other. By now soldiers on both sides wildly cheered. It became clear that nobody would die that day. An unofficial truce had been called.

"Throughout the day, both sides collected their dead and buried them. At one point soldiers from both sides gathered to honor their fallen. Together they read Psalm 23, in both German and English: "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

"Later in the day, soldiers from both sides showed pictures of their girlfriends and families to one another. Then they shared Christmas treasures of chocolate and cigarettes. Eventually, they all joined together in a pickup game of soccer.

"The next morning, on December 26, at 8:30 a.m., a British captain fired three shots into the air. He then raised a flag that said, 'Merry Christmas.'

"The Germans responded by hanging out a sheet that said, 'Thank You.' The German captain and the British captain both stood up from the trench, bowed and saluted each

other, shot into the air, and the war was on once again.

“On this Christmas Eve, you and I are not soldiers in war. But most of us are fighting a battle of some kind. Maybe a battle with illness. Or a battle to save our marriage. Or a battle with our grown children. Or a battle at our job. Or a financial battle. Or a battle with religious doubt. Or one of a hundred other battles.

“And as Christians, we are all engaged in a battle, or at least we should be. As soldiers of the kingdom of God, we are called daily to do battle against injustice and human suffering of all kinds. But at Christmas, God gives us a break in the fighting. God gives us a truce from the war. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, God lets us stop the fighting and enjoy the gift of Christmas.

“During this reprieve, this time of R and R, God reminds us that we are not alone in the world. He reminds us that Immanuel has come, that God is with us no matter what battles we face.

“And God also reminds us that we are part of a church family—part of a fellowship of friends who are called to support one another in all of life’s battles, from birth to death. On this sacred night God allows us sing the songs of Christmas, and hear the story of Jesus, and gather around the table for the sacrament of Holy Communion, and light candles in celebration of Jesus, the Light of the world.

“Oh, I know,” Paul added, “The day after Christmas, on December 26, we’ll have to reenter the battle once again. That’s just the way life is. But tonight, for just a moment, God has called a Christmas truce. Let us enjoy the reprieve, and be glad. Amen.”

After the service was over, Paul, Sarah, Hope, and Joy went home, exchanged gifts, and ate their annual post-Christmas Eve service dinner of pancakes and sausage. Then they watched, as they did every year, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. In the joy of that moment, Paul forgot about his struggles with faith, at least for a while. It was a welcome truce, indeed.

Chapter 34

Weekend in Atlanta

In early March of 2001, after Sunday lunch, Sarah excitedly told Paul, “I have a special gift for you.”

“What’s the occasion? It’s not my birthday or our anniversary.”

“No occasion. I just wanted to give you a surprise.”

Sarah handed him an envelope. Inside Paul found two tickets to the thirtieth year anniversary production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* at the Fox Theater in Atlanta, Georgia, for the last weekend in March.

“My goodness!” exclaimed Paul. “This is certainly unexpected.”

“I know you’ve always wanted to see a live performance of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I figured it was time to make it happen. I’ve made reservations at The Georgian, a historic hotel, right across the street from Fox Theater. The girls will stay with my parents. The performance is on a Friday night. So we can leave Friday morning and get back on Saturday afternoon.”

“Thank you, Sarah. This is an exceptionally thoughtful gift.”

Sarah and Paul checked into The Georgian early on Friday afternoon. After getting settled in their room, they took a long walk around the hotel, taking in many of the historic sights. Later that afternoon they took a brief nap, then ate dinner at a nearby restaurant.

That evening, Paul felt excited as they entered Fox Theater and took their seats. Years earlier Paul watched a movie version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in a theology class at seminary.

However, it mostly consisted of the professor and fellow students condemning the musical as blasphemous for depicting Jesus as a human being with uncertainties and flaws and for ending the story with his death rather than his resurrection. Given the negative tone in the class, Paul didn't say what he really thought—that he loved the musical and it moved him to his core.

At 8:00 p.m., after a brief welcome to the performance, the lights dimmed. Paul looked at Sarah and said, "Thanks again, Sarah. This is incredible!"

Early in the story, Judas warned Jesus and the disciples that things were spiraling out of control. He worried that the crowd's growing adulation of Jesus would upset Roman and Jewish authorities and cause unhappy consequences. In his song of warning, Judas acknowledged the growing belief in Jesus's divinity among the people—and his rejection of such fantasies, as he sang, "Heaven on Their Minds."

As the story progressed, the audience learned of Mary Magdalene's feelings for Jesus. In a profoundly emotional song, she sang, "I Don't Know How to Love Him." Sarah glanced at Paul. She saw tears running down his cheeks.

As act one came to a close, tensions mounted between Jesus and the authorities in Jerusalem. The conflict climaxed with Jewish leaders coming to the conclusion, "This Jesus Must Die."

In act two, Jesus and the disciples gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem. After the Last Supper, they all went to the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus left the disciples to spend time alone with God. He remembered better days and asked for God's help.

In spite of his prayers for God to intervene and save him from suffering and death, Roman soldiers arrested him, and Jesus's disciples abandoned him. After various meetings with religious and government leaders, and a mockery of a trial by Jewish leaders, the authorities found Jesus guilty. They brutally flogged and crucified him as the cast sang "Jesus Christ Superstar."

After a rousing standing ovation by the audience, Paul and Sarah left Fox Theater and walked back toward the hotel. Although late, they found a little café still open where they enjoyed a cup of decaffeinated coffee and a piece of cheesecake.

“So, what did you think?” Sarah asked him.

“It was absolutely fantastic,” Paul responded. “And deeply moving.”

As they ate their cheesecake, they talked in more detail about the play. Before leaving the café and returning to the hotel, Paul said, “As I watched the musical tonight, I couldn’t help but think of *The Passion Play* we watched years ago at Eureka Springs with the Moselys.

“That play depicted Jesus as fully divine. Tonight’s play depicted Jesus as fully human. My hunch is that *Jesus Christ Superstar* is a lot closer to the truth than *The Passion Play*.”

When they returned to the hotel, the last thing Paul or Sarah wanted to think about was theology. Instead, the two friends and lovers enjoyed their night in The Georgian hotel in downtown Atlanta. As they lay down together in the king-size bed, and Paul began to unbutton Sarah’s nightgown, he thought of the old Doors song, “Light My Fire.”

Chapter 35

“But Some Doubted”

Saturday’s drive home from Atlanta took over three hours. As usual, Paul could not help but talk about church work and theology. With Easter Sunday just two weeks away, he said, “I’m struggling with this year’s Easter sermon.”

“You always say that,” Sarah laughed.

“That’s true,” he admitted. “It’s always a challenge to tell the old story in a new and fresh way. But this year’s challenge is far more serious.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sarah.

Paul wasn’t sure if he should say the words. He paused for a long time.

Sarah, sensing something serious was on his mind, said, “So, why is this year’s Easter sermon so much more difficult than previous years?”

Paul finally fessed up. “Because I’m not sure I believe in a literal resurrection anymore.”

Instead of trying to respond to this startling confession, Sarah just listened.

“It hit me last week as I read all the resurrection stories. Obviously, I’ve read them all before. But somehow, this year, something stood out.”

“What’s that?” asked Sarah.

“The fact that the details of the Easter story are impossible to believe in the twenty-first century. Angels coming down from heaven to push the stone away from the tomb. Angels taking to people. Earthquakes shaking the ground. Dead people rising up out of their graves. Jesus walking through walls. Darkness covering the entire land.

“And right after Easter you have Jesus defying gravity and ascending into the sky, a totally incredulous concept in the modern scientific world. I mean, where did he go? There is no heaven in the sky. Instead, there are endless galaxies.”

Sarah replied, “But you tell people all the time they don’t have to take the Bible literally. So, why the concern about taking the resurrection stories literally?”

“Because they raise the bigger question of Jesus’s divinity. If the resurrection stories did not happen the way they are recorded, and I can’t believe they did, it raises the question of whether Jesus literally rose from the dead. And that does matter. It calls into question the whole issue of Jesus’s identity. Was he divine? Was he God’s Son? Or was he just a man? The entire Christian enterprise rests on this question.”

Paul continued, “For the first time since I became a Christian, I’m seriously questioning the divinity of Jesus. The more I study, the more likely it seems that Jesus was just a man, as depicted in *Jesus Christ Superstar* last night. A special man to be sure, a remarkable man. But a man nonetheless.

“I’ve done exhaustive research on the historical Jesus over the past year. The most logical conclusion is that while Jesus spoke of God and pointed to God, he never claimed to be God. Instead, Jesus rejected claims of divinity over and over again in the earliest Gospels. Instead of calling himself ‘the Son of God,’ he referred to himself as ‘the Son of *man*.’

However, his followers eventually made him into a God. Not by any deceitful motivation. In Jesus they saw and felt the presence of God in a way they had never experienced before. Given the fact that the Gospels were not written for at least forty or fifty years after Jesus died, you can see how the stories grew and evolved to the point where Jesus didn’t just point to God—Jesus was God.

“From that we got fantastical stories about a virgin-born man who made water into wine, walked on the sea, and rose from the dead. I want to be wrong about this.

I certainly might be. And I hope to goodness I am. But, given all the evidence, it seems the most likely scenario.”

Sarah replied, “Let’s say you are right, that all the supernatural aspects of Jesus are latter additions. Does it really matter? Can’t we just accept those stories as metaphors and find meaning in them anyway? For example, can’t the resurrection simply mean that the loving spirit of Jesus is still alive among his followers?

“This metaphorical approach to Christianity is what I’ve believed my entire adult life. But I still consider myself a Christian. I still believe in God. And I still do my best to follow the example and teachings of Jesus. Why isn’t that enough?”

“I know these theological details don’t bother you, Sarah. I’ve known for a long time that you don’t believe in the supernatural aspects of the Christian faith. As you told me on our first date, you ‘believe in God without all the hocus pocus.’

“But for a minister of the gospel who proclaims this story week after week, it’s a lot more complicated. It goes to the heart of my faith and to my work as a clergyperson. If I don’t believe in the literal resurrection of Jesus, I don’t think I can be a minister any longer.”

After a long pause, Paul said, “For years now, I’ve tried to ignore these inconvenient doubts and questions. But I can’t keep avoiding them. They all seem to be coming to a head, and I don’t know how to resolve them.”

Sarah noticed her husband’s eyes tear up. She reached out and took his hand. “I love you very much Paul Graham. Whatever comes from all of this won’t change that one bit.”

* * *

As Easter Sunday grew closer, Paul agonized over his Easter sermon. He reviewed, once again, every resurrection story in the New Testament, trying to find something he could hold on to, something he could preach to his congregation without compromising his integrity on Easter morning.

Finally, he came to the story of Jesus and his disciples in Matthew 28. The text says, “Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; *but some doubted.*”

Paul titled his Easter Sunday sermon “But Some Doubted.” He didn’t know it yet, but it would be his last Easter sermon.

Chapter 36

Favorite Verse

“So,” said Paul, “the question of the day is, What is your favorite passage in the Bible?”

Bill smiled and said, “Proverbs 5:18-19, ‘Rejoice in the wife of your youth, let her breasts satisfy thee at all times, and be thou ravished always with her love.’”

They both laughed so hard all the other customers at Fred’s BBQ looked at them.

“Thank God for our wives,” chuckled Paul.

“Amen to that,” replied Bill.

After they quit laughing, Bill asked Paul, “So, what’s your favorite Bible verse?”

Paul said, “Mark 9:24, ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!’ (NKJV). My second favorite verse is Matthew 28:17, ‘They worshipped him; but some doubted’ (NIV). I actually preached on that verse on Easter Sunday.”

“I’d like to hear that sermon,” Bill replied.

“It wasn’t great. I just pointed out that in all four Gospels the followers of Jesus had initial doubts about the resurrection, so we shouldn’t feel too badly about our doubts.”

“For years now, Paul, I’ve listened to you share your faith doubts. But there’s an intensity to those doubts in recent months that I’ve never heard before. What’s going on?”

“I’m not really sure. But you are correct. My doubts, which have always been there, are almost overwhelming these days. In fact, these days my doubts far outweigh my beliefs.

“As you know,” Paul explained, “I’ve lost faith in the providential care of God. I’ve lost faith, at least a lot of it, in the church. Not Grace Church per se, which is a pretty good place, but the church in general. I’m losing faith in the divinity of Jesus as we recently discussed. But now I seem to be losing faith in the core belief of Christianity.”

“What are you referring to?” asked Bill.

“I’m afraid I’m losing faith in a personal God.”

“You are going to have to explain that a bit more, my friend.”

“I’m not saying I don’t believe in God anymore, although that may be true. I sometimes think, at heart, I’ve become an agnostic. I’m not sure yet. But I am losing faith in a *traditional* God. I’m losing faith in a personal, providential, supernatural God who intervenes in the world, performs miracles, and answers prayers.

“I can’t seem to believe in that kind of God anymore. I certainly don’t *experience* that kind of God anymore. If God does exist, I’m coming to believe God is more of an evolutionary life force and love force than a personal God. For example, praying to a ‘heavenly Father’ has become virtually impossible for me in recent months.

“I don’t want these doubts,” Paul said. “I hate them actually. They scare me to death. But losing faith in a personal God seems to be the trajectory I’m currently on. I’m not fully there yet. But I’m afraid it’s where I’m going to land. And that terrifies me.

“Believe me, I *want* a heavenly Father. I want a providential God who protects me from harm. I want a God I can pray to and be comforted by. I want a personal God who considers me his beloved child. I want a God who offers hope in death. And I want to belong to a community of loving and supportive like-minded believers.

“But I’m pretty sure these deeply felt human needs are why humanity, over time, created religions with a supernatural, parental, humanlike God in the first place. I’m losing that kind of faith. And, try as I may, I can’t seem to get it back. I didn’t choose to

lose traditional faith. It just evaporated over the years, and very little remains.”

Bill hesitated to speak his mind but then decided to do so. “Paul, I know I’m your friend and not your pastor or spiritual advisor. But, as your friend, I feel compelled to respond. First, I think it’s important to remember that these kinds of struggles are not new or unique.

“Throughout Scripture and church history, God’s people have grappled with their faith. Millions of believers through the centuries have felt the silence and absence of God. I read recently that even Mother Teresa spent decades of her life without any sense of God’s presence. And yet she pressed on and remained faithful to her calling.

“I also want to remind you that in your past, you have experienced God in significant ways. God has been alive for you before, and it’s a good bet God will be alive for you again in the future. For example, think about your conversion. You told me on several occasions how powerful that experience was for you.

“You have repeatedly shared how real God felt in your life as a teenager and beyond. Don’t forget these spiritual moments, Paul. You’ve known God throughout your life. You’ve been in relationship with God.

“Remember these past connections. Take comfort in them. And expect them to return someday. I’m not trying to preach to you, Paul. I just want to remind you of your past faith and the likelihood of that faith returning again in the future. You just need to give it some time.”

“I appreciate your comments, Bill. I truly do. But it’s not that simple for me anymore. You mentioned my conversion. I’ve been thinking about that a lot recently. And I’ve come to some disconcerting conclusions. I now realize that those early spiritual experiences were my way of meeting unmet emotional needs in my life.

“You know I grew up in a dysfunctional family. You know that my father, an alcoholic, never expressed love toward me. Given those bleak realities, the church became my

surrogate family. And God became my surrogate father. And thank goodness for that! I'd be a total wreck without the church and without those early faith moments.

"But I'm afraid those early experiences had little to do with an objective God and a lot to do with a mixed-up teenager's emotional needs. My faith filled huge voids in my life that should have been filled at home. Instead, I filled those voids with a church family and with the concept of a personal and loving God.

"I'm haunted by the thought that my early faith was based more on unmet emotional needs for a loving father than it was based on an actual God."

Bill said, "Have you considered the possibility that both of those things may be true? That faith met a lot of your unmet emotional needs. But that your faith was also based on a real, loving, personal God. Both of those things can be real you know."

"I know. That's certainly what I want to believe. But even if those early spiritual experiences were authentic connections with a personal God, they happened a long time ago. I have not had an experiential encounter with God in years. I'm spiritually dried up, Bill. I can't find God anymore. And, as I already said, it's possible I never really found God in the first place.

"Instead, I may have latched onto a heavenly Father fantasy to help me cope with my deeply dysfunctional family. I'm not sure if that's the case or not. I'm deeply confused about all of this. But regardless of what actually occurred, I don't see how I can continue to serve as a minister with any sense of integrity given these troubling thoughts and feeling. I've never felt so lost in my life."

The conversation, which started out with humor and laughter, had turned deadly serious. They both knew the stakes were high not only for Paul's personal faith but for his vocation as well.

Bill wasn't sure how to respond. Finally, he said, "I can't say that I understand what you are going through or how you feel. Unlike you, I still find significant meaning in many

historical Christian beliefs, including a personal God and a divine Christ.

“I hope and pray that kind of faith will return for you. But whatever happens to your faith, I want you to know you’re the best friend I’ve ever had, and nothing will break that friendship. I love you like a brother, perhaps more than a brother, and I’m sorry you are in such a difficult spot.”

“I love you too, Bill. And I appreciate your sticking with me through this awful dark night of the soul. I couldn’t make it without your support.”

They stood up from the table, gave each other a big hug, and departed.

Chapter 37

Ten Percent Christian

Although Friday was his day off, when Paul drove back home, he went to the church office instead of his house. The church office was closed on Friday afternoons, so Paul knew it would be quiet. For the task ahead, Paul needed total solitude.

Paul sat down at his desk, took out a legal pad, and wrote down the Apostles' Creed, the historic affirmation of faith that he and his congregation recited together every Sunday morning. He had planned to engage in this theological exercise for months but kept delaying, fearful of the results.

Today, after his conversation with Bill, he finally drummed up the courage to do so. He carefully divided the ancient words into twenty-one faith affirmations:

1. I believe in God
2. The Father
3. Almighty
4. Maker of heaven and earth
5. And in Jesus
6. Christ
7. His only Son
8. Our Lord
9. Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
10. Born of the Virgin Mary
11. Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried
12. The third day he rose from the dead
13. He ascended into heaven

14. And sitteth at the hand of God the Father Almighty
15. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead
16. I believe in the Holy Spirit
17. The holy catholic church
18. The communion of saints
19. The forgiveness of sins
20. The resurrection of the body
21. And the life everlasting

Looking carefully at the twenty-one statements, he asked, *which of these statements do I really believe?*

Paul wrote “maybe” on number one, “I believe in God.”

Although I can no longer believe in a personal heavenly Father who providentially cares for creation, or supernaturally intervenes in the world, or answers prayers, or performs miracles—an evolutionary life-force, energy-force, love-force God of the universe is certainly possible. But I’m not sure. I haven’t experienced God in a very long time.

Feeling disgusted over his apparent agnosticism, he thought, *It’s pretty pitiful when an ordained minister has to write “maybe” on “I believe in God.”*

Paul wrote “maybe” next to several more of the twenty-one affirmations. But then, frustrated by his ambiguity, he finally decided that for the purpose of this exercise, “maybe” did not count.

The pressing question this afternoon is, Which of these theological affirmations do I believe without any significant reservations or doubts?

After years of struggle and denial, ruthless honesty finally prevailed.

The hard truth is that I only fully believe two of these twenty-one theological affirmations. First, I believe in Jesus—but as a man, not God. Second, I believe that Jesus suffered and died. I'm uncertain about the others.

Paul quickly did the math in his head. But, in order to get the exact percentage, he turned on his calculator and divided two by twenty-one.

According to historic creedal Christianity, I'm 9.5 percent Christian—10 percent if I round it up.

Paul sat silent at his desk for a long time. *I'm in deep trouble.*

Chapter 38

The Rocking Horse

The next morning, when Sarah and the girls left for a Saturday event, Paul went to the den, placed a video in the VCR player, and looked for the scene.

Years earlier Paul used this same VCR tape of *Inherit the Wind* for his lecture in Sarah's class about faith and evolution. The movie told the story of the famous "Scopes Monkey Trial" that occurred in a Tennessee courtroom in 1925 over the teaching of evolution in public school. Paul remembered a particular scene in the movie that he wanted to see again.

In the film, two well-known attorneys of the day tried the famous case. Although they were old friends, in recent years they had grown apart, primarily over religion. One evening during the trial, the two men sat together on the front porch of the boarding house where they were staying and had a discussion. Paul cued up the tape to the beginning of their conversation, turned it on, and watched the scene.

The scene began with the prosecuting attorney, a devout believer, asking his old friend, an agnostic, why he wanted to take people's religion away from them since it gave them comfort and hope. He noted that many religious folks were poor and uneducated and religion was all they had to hold on to.

Rather than arguing the point, the attorney for the defense told a story from his childhood. When he was a boy, he became enamored with a beautiful rocking horse in the front window of a department store. Although he wanted the rocking horse more than anything, his parents were poor and could not afford it.

However, after skimping for months, the parents managed to buy the horse for his birthday. He joyfully jumped on the rocking horse and rode it with abandon. But within minutes, the horse broke apart. It was built with shoddy materials, and the wood had also dry rotted.

He went on to explain that religion was like that rocking horse, beautiful on the outside but unable to bear the weight of reason and enlightenment. It was also infected with dry rot, including ignorance, intolerance, and bigotry—as was clearly evidenced that week among the religious community in the little town where the trial was held.

Paul turned off the VCR and TV, pulled out his journal, described the scene, then wrote a reflection.

August 25, 2001: This rocking horse scene from Inherit the Wind serves as a powerful metaphor of my own religious experience. Like that attorney when he was a little boy, I wanted the shiny pretty horse of religion that offered comfort, hope, and direction.

I also wanted the love, affirmation, and belonging that my family of origin could not provide. So, when I first saw the beautiful horse as a teenager, I immediately jumped on with joy.

But the horse could not hold the weight of science, biblical scrutiny, intellect, hard questions, logic, religious doubts, and the problem of suffering in the world.

I also discovered that the horse had dry rot, including religious-right fundamentalism, with its toxic ignorance, arrogance, and closed-mindedness, including a harsh spirit of judgment and oppression toward anyone who is different.

The dry rot also included the pettiness, politics, and cruelty that can be found in every church, even the best ones, including relentless criticism of pastors and staff members.

When the rocking horse finally broke apart under me, I realized that although religion served as a helpful rope out of the pit of my dysfunctional childhood family, it could not hold the weight of reason or the realities of the world. However, I still desperately wanted a rocking horse to ride. And by then I needed one to maintain my career.

So I built a new rocking horse, the horse of progressive Christianity, focused on grace and open-mindedness. And it worked for a long time. But I've come to realize that it, like the conservative religion I rejected in the SBC, still ultimately rests on traditional understandings of God that I can no longer believe.

I suppose it's about time for me to discard the rocking horse altogether.

But my God, it's so damn hard to do.

As he had done almost two years earlier, Paul went to the stereo, picked up *Out of Time* by R.E.M., and placed it on the turntable. He put the needle down on "Losing My Religion." He then sat back down in his recliner as tears fell from his face.

Chapter 39

September 11, 2001

On the morning of September 11, 2001, after making a hospital visit, Paul pulled into the church parking lot and walked inside. Patty, the church secretary, saw him enter and shouted from the conference room, “We’re in here, Paul. There’s been a horrible attack in New York City.”

Paul quickly walked to the conference room. Members of the church staff, along with several volunteers, watched the television in horror as the World Trade Center buildings burned. Patty, looking mortified, said, “About thirty minutes ago, an airplane flew into one of the World Trade buildings. Then, not long after, another plane smashed into the second tower.”

The small group watched unbelievable scenes on the TV screen, including smoke and fire coming out of the Twin Towers, people frantically running on the streets below, and people jumping to their deaths from the burning buildings. The network repeatedly played video clips of the airplanes hitting the two towers.

Later, the traumatized group watched in disbelief as the first World Trade Building collapsed. Not long afterwards, the second one collapsed. As they watched the apocalyptic scene unfold, Harrison, a retired construction worker doing volunteer work at the church, emotionally said to Paul, “We are watching people die right now.”

For almost two hours nobody in the group could turn away from the television. They learned that another plane attacked the Pentagon and a fourth plane crashed in an unknown location in Pennsylvania. Although it seemed impossible, America was under attack. As the enormity of the event began to dawn on them, Paul said to the staff, “We’re going to need to plan some kind of prayer service.”

The following evening, Paul stood before a packed sanctuary and read from Romans 8: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things

present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The congregation then stood and sang “O God Our Help in Ages Past.”

*Oh God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.*

After the hymn Paul invited members of the congregation to share their thoughts and feelings. For nearly thirty minutes, about a dozen people walked to the microphone set up in the middle of the sanctuary and spoke about the previous day’s attack. They shared words of shock, fear, confusion, anger, hope, faith, and resolve.

After people spoke, Paul did his best to gather all the diverse feelings of the congregation and incorporated them into an extended pastoral prayer. During the prayer, large numbers of people came forward and knelt or stood at the chancel rails.

Realizing that people needed a tangible expression of their faith that night, Paul led a simple Communion service. As he handed out bread to the congregation saying, “The body of Christ given for you,” he noticed a lot of people with tears in their eyes.

The service ended with the congregation singing, “It Is Well with My Soul.”

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say
“It is well, it is well with my soul.”*

The following Sunday, Paul preached a sermon called, “The Rest of the Christmas Story.” He chose Matthew 2:16-18 (NIV) as his text, which tells the brutal story of the slaughter of innocent children in Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus. Although rarely used in public worship, the passage felt appropriate for the occasion.

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

*“A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.”*

For the next month, Paul did his best to temporarily set aside his theological and faith struggles. Instead, he worked hard to help his congregation navigate the shock, anger, confusion, and grief that followed that awful tragedy. However, the ruthless and evil attack in the name of Allah reminded Paul of the destructive side of religion.

It also served as another painful reminder that the core Christian doctrine that God providentially cares for the world was impossible for him to believe. An all-powerful, all-loving, and all-knowing supernatural God who intervenes in the world to work his divine will could have easily prevented the attacks on 9/11.

That traditional God, at least for Paul, no longer existed, if he ever did in the first place. Even in the all-consuming trauma of 9/11, Paul knew his time as a pastor was quickly coming to an end.

Chapter 40

Final Blow

Twenty-six months before 9/11, Richard and Sandra Moseley sat across the table from Sarah and Paul. Something felt wrong in the room. Sandra then shared the devastating news. “I have stage-four breast cancer.”

Since that awful night, they had cried together, laughed together, played together, cursed cancer together, and grieved together. But their time together was almost over. In spite of surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation, the cancer continued to relentlessly return throughout Sandra’s body. Finally, Sandra said, “I’m done fighting. This war is over. It’s time to call in hospice care.”

Several weeks after her death, Paul said to Sarah, “It would be a dramatic overstatement to say that Sandra’s illness and death killed my faith. It did not. However, it would be fair to say that it was the final blow.”

The night Sandra died, Paul lay awake in his bed, thinking about her family.

I wonder how Richard feels tonight, lying alone in his bed, knowing he’ll never see or hold Sandra again. I wonder how Matt and Julie feel knowing she won’t make their graduations, their weddings, or the birth of their children.

Paul tried to pray for Richard and the kids. But he couldn’t bring himself to do so. *It’s a waste of time anyway. I prayed when Sandra first got the awful diagnosis. I prayed when she had surgery. I prayed throughout the chemotherapy and the radiation. I even prayed when they brought in hospice. None of those prayers did one bit of good. They never do.*

Two days later Paul officiated at Sandra’s funeral service. In spite of his grief, he carefully prepared every detail.

After the opening processional hymn, he stood behind the pulpit in his black robe and white stole and quoted the words of Jesus from the Gospel of John, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live.”

After music, prayers, and Scripture readings, Paul stood for his funeral message. At first, he wasn’t sure he could get through it. But, after pausing for a moment and taking a sip of water, he regained his composure, his voice returned, and he began his homily.

“As I prepared for today’s service, a vivid memory came to mind from eight years ago. Although Sarah and I had only been here for two years at the time, Sandra and Richard had already become close friends.

“We especially enjoyed going to movies together. So, in 1993, when Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan’s new movie *Sleepless in Seattle* came out, all four of us decided to hire a babysitter for both sets of kids to go see it. Sandra loved the film.

“As some of you may remember, *Sleepless in Seattle* is about a man whose wife dies from cancer at a young age, leaving him and their eight-year-old son behind. In the end, it’s an uplifting story about risking life and love again. But it’s also a story about loss and grief.

“In one scene, the grieving father, played by Tom Hanks, tries to explain the situation to his young son. He says, ‘Mommy got sick. And it happened just like that. There was nothing anybody could do. It isn’t fair. There’s no reason. But if we start asking why, we’ll go crazy.’

“Tom Hank’s character was correct. If we try to figure out why an exceptional, loving, and beautiful woman like Sandra died, we’ll go crazy. Like many of you, I’ve tried to understand why this awful thing has happened. But I have no answers.

“Instead, I join Jesus at the grave of his friend Lazarus and weep. I’ve lost one of the best friends I’ve ever known, and I feel deep sorrow today. And yet, paradoxically, I’m

also filled with overwhelming gratitude. My life, like yours, is richer, better, and larger for having known and loved Sandra Mosely.”

Paul went on to tell stories about Sandra that elicited both laughter and tears as he encouraged the congregation, including himself, to express gratitude even in grief.

After his sermon, the congregation stood and recited the words of the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord. . . .”

Paul then concluded the service by saying, “Into your hands almighty God, we commend your servant Sandra Mosely. Receive her into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints of light.”

At the graveside Paul read Psalm 23 including the words, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.” After that he led the group in the Lord’s Prayer.

Then, choking back tears, he barely got through the final committal. “From dust we come and to dust we shall return. Therefore, we commit to the ground the body of Sandra Mosely, and we commend her spirit to God’s gracious and merciful care.”

After hugging Richard, Matt, and Julie, and greeting other family members and friends, Paul walked from the gravesite to his car. The drive back to church for the post-funeral family meal felt long and terribly lonely. As he drove down the road and reflected on Sandra’s funeral, Paul knew, *I don’t believe any of this anymore.*

The next morning, in November of 2001, Paul wrote his resignation letter. Two weeks later, he left Grace Church, quit vocational ministry, and never returned.

Part Three

With a Little Help from My Friends

Chapter 41

Moving Day

Two weeks after he resigned, Glen Hightower took Paul to lunch. “The church doesn’t know how to process your resignation. I understand why you didn’t share many details beyond ‘personal faith issues.’ But there’s a lot of grief among the congregation. They truly hate to see you leave.

“Last night,” Glen continued, “the church council authorized a three-month severance package as you navigate your transition to secular work. It might surprise you that Brenda Bass made the recommendation. She said, ‘It’s the least we can do given all that Paul has done for Grace Church.’

“I know you two have had your differences. But Brenda appreciates your work here, as does every member of the council, along with the entire congregation. Given the good financial shape you have left us in, nobody spoke against the recommendation.”

Glen added, “The church council also agreed that you and your family can continue to live in the parsonage for the next two months, until mid-January. I wish it could be longer. But after a long discussion we realized we need to prepare it for the next pastor. Plus, we’ll eventually need to show it to potential candidates.”

Paul replied, “Three month’s salary and two months use of the parsonage is extremely generous. I’ll send a letter to the council immediately, thanking them. This means a lot to me and my family, Glen. I deeply appreciate it.”

Glen then said, “Fortunately, we’ve already secured an interim. I figured it would take a lot longer to find someone. You know him. Joe Bradley, who retired from St. Mark’s last year. He’s agreed to serve while we seek a new pastor.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Joe’s a good man and an excellent pastor. He’ll hold down the fort just fine as you search for my replacement. That’s an encouraging development.”

Glen then asked his friend and pastor of ten years, “What are you going to do now?”

Paul responded honestly, “I don’t have a clue.”

* * *

After Paul’s resignation, Sarah parents offered to let them move in with them temporarily to help with the transition. Paul adamantly opposed the idea.

“It’s a kind offer,” he said, “but I cannot bear the thought of moving in with our in-laws because of my decision to leave the ministry. Surely we can find a better solution.”

In the end they did. Cindy Callahan, a member at Grace who worked in the real estate business, knew about the Grahams’ search for a new home. She called Sarah late one afternoon, just a few weeks after Paul resigned.

“I’ve come upon a modest house about half a mile from the parsonage, so it’s in the neighborhood you already know. Although it needs some cosmetic work, it’s in solid shape with lots of potential. The woman who lived there for decades recently died. Her out-of-state daughter wants to sell the house as soon as possible without any hassles.

“It’s not even on the market yet. I think she would accept an offer as long as it’s in the ballpark.”

Sarah and Paul met Cindy at the house the next morning. Cindy unlocked the door for them, then said, “I need to open up a house just a few blocks away. Look things over here, and I’ll be back in about fifteen or twenty minutes.”

After they walked through the house, Paul said, “It’s pretty small, Sarah.”

“That’s true. But Hope leaves for college in just eight months, and Joy will leave home two years later, so we don’t need a large place. This will do just fine.”

“I’m sorry, Sarah. I know how much you loved the parsonage. This place is certainly not ideal for you.”

“It’s perfectly lovely, Paul. With just a few minor upgrades, most of which we can complete on our own at minimal cost, it will be beautiful.” She then added, with enthusiasm, “I actually love this place. It has a lot of character. We’ll be happy here.”

Remembering their argument a decade earlier about whether to wallpaper or paint the girl’s bathroom at the Grace parsonage, Paul joked, “I think we should wallpaper the entire house.”

Sarah played along. “No, I insist we paint every room blue.”

Paul sarcastically exclaimed, “You are such a hardheaded woman!”

Without missing a beat Sarah replied with an infectious laugh, “Yes, and that’s just the way you like it!”

When Cindy returned, Sarah said, “We’re ready to make an offer.” They went to Cindy’s office and finished all the paperwork. The next day Cindy called Sarah.

“As I expected, the owner accepted your offer. She didn’t want to risk making a counteroffer and lose a quick sale. It’s a solid house at a good price, Sarah. I’m so happy for you and Paul.”

Cindy then added, “I’ve decided to forgo my commission on the sale.”

“You don’t have to do that, Cindy. We don’t expect any special treatment.”

I know,” replied Cindy. “But I *want* to do it. After all that you and Paul have done for our church, and for me and my family, especially during the illness and death of my mom, it’s the least I can do.”

She then added, “I did some research, and I’m pretty sure we can tap into a loan program to help first-time homeowners. It will keep the down payment to a minimum, so you don’t have to exhaust your savings during this time of transition. And, given the

modest cost of the house, you can qualify for the loan based on your income alone, since we don't yet know what Paul's new salary will be."

"You are a godsend," Sarah said. "Thank you so much."

Later that evening, after Sarah left for an event at her college, Paul reflected on the numerous challenges his recent career decision caused his wife, including losing the home she enjoyed for over a decade. More significantly, his resignation represented the loss of many close friendships among the members at Grace Church.

Despite people saying otherwise, everyone knew the relationship between the Graham family and Grace would never be the same again. And yet, in spite of all that, Sarah graciously embraced the changes Paul's fateful decision had caused her.

Feeling grateful for her unwavering support, he thought to himself, *I am truly a blessed man*. However, the next nine months would feel like anything but blessed for either Paul or Sarah.

Chapter 42

Descent

Nine months after Paul's resignation, unknown to her husband, Sarah called Bill Sanford on the phone. "Bill, I'm sorry to bother you, but I need some help. I've never seen Paul so lost. It's like he's a different person."

"Bring me up-to-date," requested Bill. "Since Paul left Grace, we've not talked much. I keep pressing him to get together, but he keeps finding excuses to skip our monthly lunch gathering. And he doesn't return many of my calls."

Sarah said, "At first, right after he resigned, Paul felt relieved. Although he loved his vocation—from working closely with people to preparing for Sunday—the final few months became unbearable for him. He said he felt like a hypocrite, like a 'closeted agnostic.'"

"He told me that since he had lost all semblance of traditional faith and was now a secular pastor, just going through the motions, he could no longer do the job with integrity. He just wanted out. However, his initial feelings of relief eventually turned to despair."

"He interviewed for several jobs that interested him, including a human resources position at a medical clinic, a reporter's job at the local newspaper, and several other positions. However, he kept hearing the same response: he was not qualified by education or experience to do the work. And unfortunately, it's true."

"Paul has held five jobs in his life, all in church work. Youth minister and then associate pastor at his college church, a student pastorate during seminary, pastor at Trinity, and pastor at Grace. He holds an undergraduate degree in religion and a master of divinity. None of that translates into an abundance of secular options."

"I'm sorry to hear he's had such a difficult time finding employment," Bill said. "I didn't realize how challenging it would be."

Sarah continued, “Finally, after one disappointing interview after another, my father offered him a position at his furniture business. As you may know, my dad operates two large furniture stores in town called Furniture City. Paul spends most of his time working the sales floor.

“However, my father also has him involved in an informal management training program, hoping Paul will eventually pick up some of the administrative side of the business. Dad, seventy-two years old now, wants to work fewer hours. He trusts Paul and believes he could handle some management tasks. But the hard truth is that Paul can’t stand his job. He doesn’t complain about it, but I know he detests it.

“In spite of his disappointments and struggles,” Sarah added, “Paul managed fairly well the first six months after leaving Grace. However, over the past three months, Paul has settled into an intolerable routine. He comes home from work totally exhausted, drinks too many beers, and watches too much TV.

“Paul never drank before, except an occasional beer during a cookout on the grill. Now he drinks several beers every night. He rarely watched TV before. Now he mindlessly watches anything on the air. He’s withdrawn from most everything he used to enjoy. He doesn’t read anymore. He doesn’t want to go hiking, camping or canoeing. He did not engage in Hope’s final college decisions.

“The girls and I are attending my home church, Second Presbyterian, but Paul won’t join us. And that’s OK. I understand his need to be away from church. But he needs some kind of connection with others. I’m worried about him, Bill. This behavior is not at all like Paul. And, to be perfectly blunt, I’m frustrated with him as well. He’s not making any serious effort to move forward with his life.”

“What can I do to help?” asked Bill.

“I’d like for you to talk to him.”

“He keeps brushing me off,” replied Bill.

“Don’t let him off the hook this time.”

“OK, I’ll do my best to see him soon and have a frank conversation.”

Her voice now choking with emotion, Sarah said, “Thank you Bill.”

The next day Bill called Paul and pressed him for a lunch visit. “It’s way past time to meet up at Fred’s. I’m starving for some good BBQ.” Although Paul attempted to resist the visit, Bill politely refused Paul’s flimsy excuses. They set a lunch date for the following week.

“I look forward to seeing you and catching up,” said Bill.

“Me to,” Paul replied, both wanting to see his old friend, yet embarrassed to do so at the same time.

Several days later, Sarah, Hope, and Joy departed on their long-planned Girls’ Week Away trip before Hope began college. They offered to take Paul along, “Even though you are a man,” said Hope.

“Thanks honey, but it’s too late to schedule a week off at the store.”

Two days later Paul waved goodbye to the girls, then walked back into the empty house.

Over the past few months, Paul had spent a lot of time talking with Sharon Wilson, the bookkeeper at Furniture City. Sharon, an attractive young woman in her mid-thirties, recently divorced her husband. Their conversations began innocently enough as Paul learned more about the financial and administrative side of his father-in-law’s business. However, their long conversations soon became more than business necessities.

For Sharon, Paul represented everything her ex-husband was not: compassionate, empathic, and a good listener. She also found Paul attractive. For the past few weeks,

Sharon openly flirted with Paul. Although he didn't encourage it, he didn't discourage it either. For a man with a dead-end job selling furniture in his mid-forties, it gratified his deeply damaged ego that an attractive young woman found him interesting.

Besides, he rationalized to himself, *we've done nothing improper. We are just talking with each other. It's all innocent.* Until it wasn't.

Sharon, with plenty of emotional baggage of her own after an unhappy marriage and bitter divorce, knew Paul's family had left town for the week. So, on Thursday afternoon, while wearing an alluring low-cut blouse, she said to Paul, "How would you like to go out for some drinks tonight after work?"

After a moment of awkward silence, Paul politely declined the offer. But the fact that he even thought about it for a few moments disgusted him.

So this is what I've become. A middle-aged ex-preacher with no career, no prospects for one, flirting with a woman ten years younger than I am who works for my father-in-law, while having an exceptional wife and two beautiful daughters at home. It's beyond pathetic.

It literally made Paul sick. He called in ill on Friday and cancelled his lunch with Bill on Saturday.

Sunday afternoon, when Sarah and the girls returned home, she found the kitchen and den full of empty beer bottles. Her half-drunk husband, who had not bathed for several days, slept on the sofa while the TV blared.

Sarah was livid. She woke Paul up and read him the riot act.

"For months now, Paul, I've put up with your boorish behavior. I know this transition has been tough on you. I'm truly sorry that is the case. So I've given you time to come to grips with all of it.

“But this is not acceptable anymore. You never talk to me or the girls. You never want to do anything. Instead, you come home from work every night and drink beer and watch TV. Now I come home with the girls and find you like this. This has to end Paul, right now, or else.”

“Or else what?”

Sarah ignored the question. “I cannot continue like this anymore. You simply have to get your shit together, Paul! Not later but now!”

Sarah stomped off to the master bedroom and slammed the door.

Paul slept on the sofa that night.

Chapter 43

It's Called Grief

Three weeks later Paul and Bill finally met for lunch. Their friendship went too deep to play games. So, immediately after ordering their meal, Paul skipped any small talk and immediately spoke the unvarnished truth to his best friend.

"I'm sorry for brushing you off so many times, Bill. Thanks for not giving up on me. The fact is, I've been embarrassed to see you. My life is a total wreck. I feel lost in the woods and don't know how to get out. I didn't want you to see me like this."

Paul felt like a Roman Catholic parishioner at confession with his priest.

"I can't stand my job. I've neglected Sarah and the girls. I didn't even help Hope as she navigated her final college choices.

"I've been drinking far too much, although I quit, cold turkey, after a big blowup with Sarah three weeks ago, which was entirely my fault. I haven't had a drink since and don't think I ever will again. I don't even *want* one. Drinking made me absolutely miserable. But I'm embarrassed by the behavior, especially in front of the girls."

"Well, at least you quit," said Bill. That's a very important step."

Ignoring Bill's complement, Paul added, "Even worse, for a while I flirted around with an employee at the store. I've completely cut that off. I only speak to her when absolutely necessary now. Nothing happened between us. But still, I'm ashamed of the flirtation.

"I probably have the best wife in history. Never, not in a million years, would I want to hurt Sarah. She's been beyond wonderful during this awful time. I don't know how she puts up with me anymore. I know I'm a major disappointment to her right now. I feel like I'm in a dark place and am spreading that darkness to all the people around me, especially Sarah.

“The truth is, Bill, I’m stuck. But I don’t know how to get unstuck. I’m disgusted with myself. I feel like a total failure in every way. I’ve failed God. I’ve failed my church. I’ve failed my family. I’ve failed myself. I’m worthless to everyone.”

“Perhaps you are being a bit too hard on yourself,” said Bill.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, I *do* think so,” Bill firmly replied. “I’m certainly not excusing the drinking or the flirting around. But at least you stopped both of them in their tracks. Those are huge steps, Paul. You’re not a failure! Stopping drinking and cutting off a potential affair are major *successes*.”

“Clearly, you need to make some additional changes. But you’ve already made two extremely important ones. And you are far from disgusting.”

“Sarah may be frustrated with you, but she loves you with every fiber of her being. In your heart you know that. Yes, you’ve gotten off track lately. But you are still a person of great value and worth to Sarah, Hope, Joy, me, Richard Mosely, and a lot of other people.”

Bill continued, “I’m not a trained psychologist, but it seems pretty clear what’s going on with you right now. It doesn’t take a degree in psychology to figure that out.”

“So, what is your diagnosis, Dr. Sanford?” Paul asked with a mixture of sarcasm and intense interest.

“It’s called grief,” replied Bill.

“Explain further what you mean by that,” demanded Paul.

“Over the past decade, you have experienced enormous grief, Paul. First, you lost the conservative evangelical faith of your youth. That’s no small thing. That faith changed

your life, but then it could not hold. Then you left the Baptist church.

“I know you had no real choice. I did the same thing. But that change represented massive losses in our lives. Everything we worked for all those years—gone in a heartbeat. All the relationships. All the successes. All the history. All the hopes and dreams we had for our future in that denomination. The fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention destroyed every bit of that.

“When I finally left the Baptist church, I felt absolutely crushed. It took me over a year to recover. But you never took time to grieve that loss. You immediately went to Grace Church and threw yourself into that work. But, in the wake of that decision, you left behind an important part of your story and a huge piece of your heart and soul. That’s a painful loss. One you never fully processed.”

“I suppose you are right about that,” Paul conceded.

Bill continued, “But losing your old evangelical faith, and then your old denomination, is just the tip of the iceberg. Over the past five years, I’ve watched you slowly lose your faith in God, at least in a traditional God. You lost your faith in a providential God, in a divine Jesus, in miracles, in institutional religion, and in a personal, supernatural God.

“I’ve known you since your sophomore year in college, Paul. Your entire life centered on your faith. Losing that faith represents a massive loss. I can’t begin to think how painful that must be. It’s like losing a spouse or a child. You’ve agonized with this for years.

“I’ve watched it unfold right before my eyes, and it has pained me to witness it. Your grief, on several significant levels, has been overwhelming. It’s no wonder you find yourself in such a tough spot right now.

“But that’s still not the whole story,” added Bill. “You’ve also lost your vocation. For years, you loved your job, were good at it, and thrived doing it. Being a minister was a core part of your life. In many ways it defined who you were.

“Being a minister was your primary identity and gave you status in the community. You gained constant affirmation and meaning from that vocation. Now that vocation is dead and gone. Instead, you sell furniture for your father-in-law.”

“You make it sound pretty bad,” said Paul.

“Because it is bad,” Bill replied. “Very much so. Think about it, Paul. You lost faith in your conservative evangelical faith. You lost your old Baptist life and all it represented. You lost your faith in God, a devastating development. You lost your vocation. With it, you also lost your living.

“You told me earlier that when you consider the parsonage and your benefits, you are making less than one half the money you did before. That can’t be easy to accept. And today you sit across this table and tell me how disgusting you are and how big a failure you’ve become. So, on top of all these massive losses I’ve just mentioned, you have now lost faith in yourself.

“My God, Paul, these are *brutal losses*! Any one of them alone would be difficult to navigate. Bearing all of them at the same time is soul crushing, more than anybody could manage without major trauma. It’s a wonder you are still standing.

“Of course you feel stuck and lost. How could you feel any different? Everything you are feeling is a perfectly normal response to one massive loss after another, in both your personal and your professional life.”

In spite of being in a public place, Paul teared up and began to cry. Try as he may, he could not stop the tears from flowing. He could barely get any words out but finally said, “I’ve got to go outside for a few minutes.”

Bill said, “Take as long as you need. I’ll be waiting for you right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

Paul briskly walked out the back exit of Fred's, went to his car, opened the door, and shut himself in. For the next fifteen minutes he cried uncontrollably. A decade's worth of grief rolled over him like massive waves, pounding him without mercy, one after another.

Chapter 44

Let the Healing Begin

Paul finally regained his composure, left his car, and went back inside. “I’m sorry, Bill, for leaving you like that. But I didn’t want to have an emotional meltdown in the middle of a restaurant.”

“I completely understand,” said Bill. “But I ate all your ribs,” he kidded, and they both had a good laugh. After the intensity of their previous conversation and the overwhelming emotion it evoked in Paul, it provided a much-needed moment of therapeutic relief.

In that moment of levity, Paul remembered a scene from one of his favorite movies, *Good Will Hunting*. Sarah, Paul, Bill, and his wife Lisa watched it together when it first released in 1997. The film, starring Matt Damon, Robin Williams, and a cast of other highly skilled actors, portrayed the powerful story of Will Hunting, a twenty-year-old mathematical genius struggling with deep emotional scars.

Given their high regard for the film, Paul and Bill watched it together a second time when it came out on video. In one memorable scene, the lead character sarcastically said to his psychiatrist, “Let the healing begin.”

Paul said to Bill, “So, do you remember watching *Good Will Hunting*?”

“Of course I do,” said Bill. “We watched it together twice. I’ve watched it two more times since then with Lisa. I think I know all the lines by heart!”

Paul, with exaggerated drama and sarcasm said to Bill, “Let the healing begin!”

Both men enthusiastically laughed.

After a moment of comfortable silence, Paul said, “All joking aside, I think perhaps the healing has begun, at least a bit. Just giving a name to this awful mess I’m in is exceptionally helpful.

“I’ve not thought of this dark time as multiple losses all piled up, one upon the other, like a massive train wreck. But you are exactly right. This is all about multiple layers of serious grief. For the first time, I see that clearly now. And just naming that reality is a huge first step in getting better.

“I’ve been around a lot of grief as a pastor, so I’m aware that grief recovery is slow, hard work that doesn’t come easy. But I think I’m ready to begin that work.”

Bill said, “I’ll send you my bill tomorrow.”

Again they both enjoyed a hearty laugh.

Paul then said, “I know moving beyond grief can’t be done all at once. It has to be accomplished step-by-step. So I need to figure out what initial steps to take.”

“You’ve already taken a big step,” Bill replied, “the most important one, by stopping the drinking. But let’s think some more about this. What one additional tangible step could you take right away that would help you move forward?”

“My goodness,” Paul exclaimed, “you really do sound like a therapist! But I’ll play along. It sure can’t hurt.

“So let me answer your question. To move forward I need a new job. But I’ve been working on that for months without success. Eventually, that will have to happen, and I’m confident it will. For example, I’m currently exploring some promising work opportunities in social work.

“But finding the right job is going to take some time to figure out. For now I need a smaller step, something I can do immediately. And it needs to be something that gets me beyond my own problems and makes contributions to other people. For the past nine months, I’ve been completely self-absorbed with my own pain. I need to move beyond that.”

“Bill said, “During your ten years at Grace, other than the pastoral and religious duties, what did you most enjoy?”

Paul thought about the question for a moment, then said, “Several things come to mind. But I think I most enjoyed my partnership with the Community Help Center. Grace Church wanted to engage in social ministry. But we knew we couldn’t do it alone; we needed to partner with an agency.

“However, the church-related social ministry agencies in town seemed more interested in getting people saved than in helping them with their pressing issues like hunger, health care, and housing. So we began working with the Community Help Center.

“It’s a secular social agency, although several progressive churches help provide funding and volunteers. I loved going to the center and spent a lot of time there. I made friends with the staff and met many of their clients. Sarah came with me sometimes, along with Hope and Joy, to help with their food pantry work. Volunteering there proved a positive experience for our entire family.”

Bill said, “What about reconnecting there? It could be a promising step for you.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Paul replied, “I’ll go visit the director next week and see what I can do to help. It will feel good to serve there again.”

“Sounds like a smart plan to me,” Bill said.

“So, how much do I owe you for this therapy session, Dr. Stanford?”

“How about you buy me a banana pudding.”

“Done.”

After eating a serving of banana pudding and after talking for another hour, Paul and Bill finally left Fred’s BBQ for the drive home. Paul felt better than he had for nine

months. As he said goodbye to Bill and walked to his car, he thought, *Let the healing begin, indeed.*

Before driving out of the parking lot, Paul pulled out one of his old homemade tapes and placed it in the cassette player. As he drove down the highway, he thought about Bill and Sarah's love and support over the past awful year. With a grateful heart, he joined Ben King in singing "Stand by Me." Fifteen minutes later, when he was about halfway home, tears filled his eyes when he listened to Simon and Garfunkel sing "Bridge over Troubled Water."

Chapter 45

Back in the Saddle

The following Monday, Paul drove to the Community Help Center. When he walked into the lobby, the director, Laurie Medley, saw him from her office desk. The two had been close friends during Paul's years at Grace Church. Laurie, in her early sixties now, felt like a second mother to Paul. They worked together at the Center for nearly a decade before Paul resigned from Grace. She excitedly ran to him, gave him a huge hug, and said, "Paul Graham, it's good to see you!"

"It's good to see you too, Laurie."

"I've been meaning to call you," said Laurie. "I heard you left Grace and now work with Sarah's father."

"It's a long story," said Paul.

"I'd like to hear all about it," replied Laurie.

"Perhaps another day."

Although Laurie wanted to know more about Paul's recent story, she respected his privacy. "So, what brings you here today?"

"I'd like to get involved at the Center again."

"That's fantastic!" exclaimed Laurie. "We've missed having you here."

"I've missed being here, more than you know. However, with my work schedule and family responsibilities, I only have a limited amount of time to help. But I'd like to do something."

"What do you have in mind?"

“Whatever would be most helpful to you,” Paul replied. “For now I can block out Saturday mornings.”

“Saturday mornings are perfect. That’s our busiest day of the week. And I know exactly where to plug you in. I’d like you to help with new client processing. New people come in every Saturday. They feel nervous about being here and are often embarrassed to ask for help. You work well with people and put them at ease.

“You know what resources we offer and how to refer them to the appropriate departments at the Center. You also know our limitations and can refer them to other agencies as needed. Having you here on Saturday mornings to process new applicants will be exceptionally helpful.”

“So I’ll see you Saturday morning.”

“I’m counting on it. And Paul, it’s good to have you back.”

It’s good to be back,” Paul replied, feeling more emotion than he let on.

Paul arrived early Saturday morning, eager to get back in the saddle at the Center. He dove into the work with enthusiasm. It felt good to focus on serving others rather than dwelling on his own struggles. His four-hour shift from 8:00 a.m. to noon clipped by rapidly.

He hated to leave, but he had promised to substitute for a coworker that afternoon on the sales floor at Furniture City. That evening, Paul told Sarah all about his experience at the Center. She could feel her husband’s enthusiasm and sensed he had finally turned a corner.

Paul told Sarah about one particular case. “A woman named Ann came in for the first time, seeking help with her rent. She works a full-time minimum-wage job as cashier at a Convenient Mart. She got sick and missed several weeks of work, putting her behind on her bills. She’s a single mom.

“I met her son Joshua. He’s a shy six-year-old with a beautiful smile.

“We paid her rent shortfall. She expressed overwhelming gratitude for the help. They live in a large downtown apartment building. I’m familiar with the complex from my previous work at the Center. It caters to the working poor, and it’s not in great shape. But, for a lot of people, it’s the only housing they can afford.”

“During my conversation, I found out Ann’s son, Joshua, doesn’t have a bed. He sleeps on a blanket on the bare floor. They didn’t ask for anything except help on the rent. However, I thought, *I work at a furniture store for goodness’ sake, I can do something about this!* So I talked to your dad, and we agreed to split the cost of a mattress, box spring, and frame. It’s not much money. I hope that’s OK with you.”

“It’s more than OK,” said Sarah, excited to see Paul animated again.

“Your dad also agreed to piggyback the bed delivery with some other deliveries. I’m going to take it to their apartment Wednesday afternoon. Since you don’t have classes scheduled on Wednesday afternoons, I’m hoping you might go with me. I think Ann might feel more comfortable if a woman could be present during the delivery.”

“I’d love to be a part of that,” replied Sarah. She also had an idea.

On Tuesday afternoon, on her way home from work, Sarah stopped at Walmart. She bought linens for a twin bed, pajamas for a six-year-old boy, and a stuffed dinosaur.

On Wednesday afternoon, they delivered the bed to the family, set it up, then gave Joshua his sheets, pajamas, and stuffed animal. The young boy danced around his room, overwhelmingly excited. “My own bed!” he exclaimed, over and over again. As Sarah and Paul made Joshua’s bed, his mother Ann wept with gratitude.

As they left the apartment Paul realized, *I’ve not felt this much joy in over a year.*

* * *

The next Saturday morning, Ann and Joshua returned to the Center with a Hispanic woman and her two twin daughters. Ann introduced all three of them to Paul. She said, “Maria and her family live in the same apartment complex as Joshua and me. Her girls don’t have a bed to sleep in. I was wondering if you could help them like you did for Joshua.”

“Absolutely,” said Paul.

Since the girls shared a small bedroom, Paul arranged to use funds from the Center to purchase a bunkbed for the girls. Sarah’s dad provided the bunkbed at his cost, and delivered it for free.

* * *

Several months later Paul stood before the board at the Community Help Center. He knew most of them from his work at Grace.

“I appreciate the opportunity to be here tonight. I have a proposal concerning a possible new program for the Center.” Paul then told them about the two families needing beds and his efforts on their behalf.

“Since helping those two families,” Paul said, “I’ve learned this is a much bigger issue than I realized. The sad reality is that large numbers of children in this city either have no bed to sleep in or else sleep in a defective one. So I’d like the Community Center to begin a new program called Lay Me Down to Sleep that provides new beds for children living in poverty. I’d be happy to be the point person on it.”

One of the board members said, “This sounds like a great idea, Paul. But how will we fund the program? As you know, our finances are already strained.”

Paul had already anticipated the question. “I know a large number of pastors throughout the city. Many of their congregations will be more than happy to help sponsor the program. In fact, I’ve already talked with several of them about this possibility, and their responses were enthusiastic.

“I also meet a lot of business owners through my work at Furniture City. I’m confident many of them will provide corporate support. It will be tremendous PR for them. And, if you approve this program, my father-in-law is willing to provide the beds at cost and deliver them for free.

“He has half a dozen trucks delivering furniture all over the city every day and is happy to help with deliveries. I’m willing to do the legwork on this program, from fundraising to implementation. But I need your blessing to make the program an official offering at the Center.”

As Laurie and Paul expected, the board gave their enthusiastic and unanimous approval for the project. At first nobody realized how big this ministry would become, including Paul. But within a decade nearly a thousand children gained beds through the Lay Me Down to Sleep program.

* * *

Six months after he began volunteering at the Center, Paul added a second shift on Wednesday afternoons, doing whatever work they needed done. Sarah and Joy joined him after school to work at the food pantry, and they all went out to dinner afterwards. It soon became a highlight of the week for the Graham family. In time the dark days of the previous year became a fading memory.

All the while, the director of the Community Help Center, Laurie Medley, had far bigger plans for Paul than covering two volunteer shifts a week. But, for the time being, she had to keep those plans secret.

* * *

Several weeks after Paul added a second shift to his volunteer work at the Help Center, he cleaned out some old files in his home office desk drawer. One of the files included clippings and stories he had saved during his pastoral years for use in upcoming sermons. In the file he found a story called “The Magical Mustard Seed.” Since he wasn’t preparing sermons anymore, Paul tossed it into the trash. But then, on second thought, he pulled the story out of the trash can and read it.

The Magical Mustard Seed

An ancient legend tells about a woman whose only son died. In her grief she went to a holy man and said, "What magical incantations do you have to heal my grief?"

He said to her: "Fetch me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. We will use it to drive the sorrow out of your life."

The woman went off at once in search of that magical mustard seed. She came first to a splendid mansion, knocked at the door, and said: "I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place?"

They told her, "You've certainly come to the wrong place," and they began to describe all the tragic things that recently had befallen them.

The woman said to herself, "Who better able to help these poor, unfortunate people than me, having had misfortune of my own?"

So she stayed to comfort them for a while and then went on in search of a home that had never known sorrow. But wherever she turned, in hovels and in mansions, she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune.

She became so involved in caring for other people's grief that ultimately she forgot about her quest for the magical mustard seed, never realizing that it had, in fact, driven the sorrow out of her life.

Chapter 46

Job Offer

In the fall of 2003, a year after he began volunteering at the Community Help Center, Laurie asked Paul to come into her office for a conversation.

“Am I in trouble?” Paul joked.

“Hardly,” replied Laurie.

She wasted no time getting down to business. “For the past three years, I’ve applied for a grant to hire an associate director. The Center continues to grow exponentially, volunteers and gifts continue to increase, and we desperately need additional administrative help. Last week the grant finally came through.”

“That’s great news,” said Paul.

Laurie continued, “I met with our board last night. They unanimously agreed to offer you the associate director position. We believe you are the perfect person for the job.

“You have a long history with our organization. You have deep passion for our mission. You know people throughout the city. You have great organizational and people skills. And you are exceptionally effective at recruiting volunteers. Paul, the board and I want you in this position more than I can possibly say.”

Paul sat in his chair, stunned. “This was not on my radar!” he exclaimed.

“It’s been on mine since the day you returned to the Center a year ago.”

Laurie told him the salary. “It’s not as much as you are worth, and it’s not as much as I hoped for. But for now it’s what we have to offer.”

Paul said, “I’m flattered by the offer. And the possibility of working here full-time

excites me. But this is a major decision. I need to mull it over. More important, I need to talk to Sarah about it.”

“Take as long as you need to make a decision,” replied Laurie. “Just make sure to say yes in the end!”

Sarah responded enthusiastically to the big news. “This is absolutely fantastic, Paul! I’m so excited for you.”

“It’s not that simple,” he said.

“What’s not simple about it? It’s a no-brainer!”

“Not quite,” Paul replied. “As you know, since I added management duties, your dad significantly increased my salary. And I’ve gotten into the corporate office furniture niche, and that’s proven profitable. If I take this job at the Center, I’ll take a major cut in pay.”

“To hell with the pay, Paul. This is an opportunity for you to do something you love, something that matters, something you are passionate about. And our finances are just fine. As a tenured professor, I make a good salary.

“Hope has a full scholarship. Joy is knocking her science and math classes out of the park, so I have no doubt she will also receive a good scholarship. And, even if she doesn’t, she plans to attend Mid-State. With the discount for faculty children, her college costs will be minimal. You have to accept this opportunity!”

Paul teared up and said, “I love you, Sarah Graham.”

“I love you too. Now call Laurie and tell her you are accepting the job!”

“What about your dad?” Paul asked. “He’ll be disappointed to get this news, especially since I’ve taken on some management responsibilities.”

“You let me take care of my dad,” Sarah replied.

Paul thrived in his new position. Under his leadership, the Center made significant strides in every area, including a new program connecting released prisoners with sponsors, dramatically driving down their recidivism rate. He also helped spearhead a major expansion in the Center’s health-care services. He recruited Richard Mosely and a host of other doctors, nurses, and dentists to help provide much needed care for the working poor.

Paul felt more engaged and alive than he had since his first few years at Grace Church. One day at lunch Sarah told her parents, “I’ve never seen Paul this happy before.”

Almost two years after he accepted his position, Paul told Bill, “Although the Center is a secular organization, it feels like a spiritual calling to me. Although I don’t use religious language at work, in my own heart I feel like I’m in ministry again. My personal mission statement comes from the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, ‘To the extent you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me.’ My creed is no longer the Apostles’ Creed but the words of Jesus in that same text, ‘I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me.’”

“You almost sound like a preacher!” joked Bill.

“I guess I do,” laughed Paul.

* * *

Laurie Medley had one more surprise up her sleeve for Paul Graham, one she hid from him for over a year. On his second anniversary as associate director of the Community Help Center, Laurie took Paul out to lunch.

“I’ve decided to retire, Paul. I’m sixty-five years old now. I’m eligible for Medicare and full Social Security benefits. My husband, who retired last year, has been encouraging me to join the retirement ranks for months now. We want to travel. And we want to spend more time with our grandkids.”

“I told the board about my retirement last night. I’m sorry for not giving you a heads-up. But I had a good reason for not telling you.”

“What reason is that?” Paul asked.

“Because I told the board that my retirement plans hinged on them hiring you as the new director.”

“You did what?” exclaimed Paul.

“Hear me out, Paul. I’ve put my heart and soul into this place for twenty-eight years. I wasn’t about to depart without leaving the Center in capable hands.”

Paul scolded her. “You can’t choose your own successor!”

“I certainly can. And I certainly did! Oh, the Center will have to post the job. However, the requirements they are going to list will make you the only viable option. It’s a done deal.”

Laurie continued, “But here’s what you need to know. I didn’t have to twist one arm, not even a little bit. The board immediately and unanimously affirmed my request. They absolutely, 100 percent, want you to become the director. In fact,” Laurie kidded, “they were so enthusiastic about you taking over the helm that it almost hurt my feelings!”

“So,” she asked, “do you want the job?”

“Of course I do!” Paul exclaimed.

“Don’t you want to know what the salary is and what the benefits are?”

“I don’t care,” Paul said, “I want the job!”

“Then it’s all yours,” Laurie said, as tears of joy fell from her eyes.

Chapter 47

Blest Be the Tie

Two months after Paul took over as director of the Help Center, he received a phone call no parent ever wants to get. Sarah called him at his office, speaking hysterically. She finally calmed down enough to tell Paul what was going on.

“Joy has been in an accident. We are at the hospital.”

Paul rushed to the ER. Upon arrival, he discovered Joy had already been transferred to the ICU. Upon arrival at Joy’s room, Sarah filled him in on the details.

“She was riding in a car with several of her friends. They drove through a green light. A car, coming from the other direction at high speed, did not stop for the light and rammed them.

“Joy, sitting in the front passenger seat, took the brunt of the hit. Soon after, she went into a coma. The doctors are concerned she might have internal injuries, and she also suffered a major blow to her head. They say it’s a waiting game right now. We won’t know much more until tomorrow.”

After spending six hours in the ICU with Sarah and Joy, Paul went to the lobby to get a cup of coffee. It looked like it was going to be a long night.

When he walked out of Joy’s ICU room into the lobby, Paul saw at least two dozen members of the Grace Church congregation in the waiting room, looking distraught. The sight took his breath away. Paul had not been the pastor at Grace for three years, yet members of his old congregation filled the room. His eyes welled up with tears.

Glen Hightower briskly walked up to Paul and said, “We heard about the accident. People spontaneously decided to come to the hospital. How is Joy?”

Paul responded, “We don’t know yet. It’s sort of touch-and-go right now.”

Glen hugged his old friend and pastor.

The entire group crowded around Paul to get a report on Joy. He brought them up-to-date on her condition. Glen asked Paul if they could pray for Joy. Overwhelmed, Paul choked up, and for a moment he could not speak. When he finally got his voice back, he said, “Of course.”

Glen led the group in prayer. “Dear Lord, we pray for Joy and her family. We ask that you bless the doctors that attend to her and help her make a full recovery. Please give an extra measure of your grace and strength to Paul and Sarah. Hold them close in your loving hands. We pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray together, saying . . .”

Although Paul had serious doubts about God being a heavenly Father, he joined his friends in praying the Lord’s Prayer because, in this terrifying time he needed to feel connected to people he loved and to people who loved him. So Paul, along with the others, began to pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. . . .”

Thankfully, the news the next morning proved encouraging. Although she had a broken leg, some broken ribs, and a whopper of a lump on her head, the doctor said to Paul and Sarah, “Joy is going to be fine.”

* * *

Days after the accident, Paul kept thinking about the members at Grace who came to the ICU waiting room. He called Bill on the phone to bring him up-to-date on Joy’s condition, which improved every day.

Paul then told Bill, “When I saw all those people from Grace show up in the ICU waiting room, I remembered a feeling from my high school church days. After taking Communion, the congregation gathered in a big circle all the way around the sanctuary. Then we sang ‘Blest Be the Tie.’ Do you remember it?”

Bill and Paul spontaneously sang the old song together, “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment.

“It’s been a long time since I sang that old song,” said Bill.

“Me too.”

Paul then said, “Although I can no longer affirm traditional faith, I miss that feeling of Christian community. I don’t know anyplace else where that kind of human connection can be replicated. If I ever return to church, that’s what would attract me.”

* * *

Paul then told Bill a story he read a few weeks earlier.

“A middle-aged atheist named Fred regularly attended worship at a Jewish synagogue. Finally, someone got up the nerve to ask him about this. ‘Fred, everyone here knows you don’t believe in God. So we can’t help but wonder—why do you come to worship every week? We’re glad you are here, but it’s a bit confusing.’”

“Fred smiled and pointed to a man across the room. He said, ‘Do you see Mr. Simon over there? Mr. Simon comes to worship every week to talk to God. I come to worship every week to talk to Mr. Simon.’”

Bill laughed. “That’s a great story. So, are you suggesting that you might come back to church some day?”

“I don’t know,” Paul honestly answered. “But stranger things have happened.”

Bill said, “I hope you *will* return to church someday. As you used to believe, and as I still believe, God mediates his presence through Christian community. In my humble opinion that’s what you experienced the other night at the ICU.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Paul replied. “The folks coming from Grace to the hospital certainly caught my attention. It would be nice to be part of a community like that again. But the rub is, I can’t bring myself to believe all the theological baggage that comes with it.”

“The doctrines are secondary, Paul. The main thing is God and the people of God, trying to love and support one another on the journey. Plenty of people who go to church no longer believe in a literal Bible, or miracles, or the fourth-century creeds. They just know that God exists in some form, and somehow that mysterious God is found in community with other people. They know the journey can be hard, and we need friends along the way.”

“You make some good points,” conceded Paul. I’ll keep thinking on it.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” replied Bill.

Then he added, “Since you told me a story, I have one for you.”

“I’m all ears,” said Paul.

“I recently read a book by a rabbi. In the book he tells about going to the beach for vacation. As he sat on the beach, he watched two children playing in the sand. They worked hard building an elaborate sandcastle by the water’s edge, with gates, towers, and even a moat. They had almost completed their sandcastle when a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand.

“The rabbi expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by the loss of all their hard work. But the children surprised him. Instead of crying, they held each other’s hand, laughed a big belly laugh, and sat down to build another castle.

“The rabbi said he learned an important lesson from those children that day. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spent so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Sooner or later a wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. And when that happens, only the person who has somebody’s hand to hold will be able to laugh and rebuild.”

“You should have been a preacher,” laughed Paul.

“I think I’ll stick to teaching. But I do hope you’ll think about the story and the need for Christian community.”

“I will,” promised Paul.

Later that evening, still thinking about his phone conversation with Bill, and the earlier event at the hospital, Paul went to the den. He opened his album cabinet and pulled out *Still Bill*. He laid the album on the turntable, placed the needle on the song he wanted, and enthusiastically joined Bill Withers as he sang “Lean on Me.”

Chapter 48

Deconstruction

When Bill and Paul set their next lunch date, Paul warned him, “I’ve been doing a lot of theological thinking lately. Be prepared for a long lunch at Fred’s!”

“I look forward to it,” Bill replied.

After they ordered lunch, Paul said, “For the past few months, I’ve been watching a construction project in process about a block from our house. First, they tore down the old house, dilapidated beyond repair. It only took a day and a half to tear it down and haul away the debris. But it’s taken several months to rebuild a new home.”

“The point being?” asked Bill.

“The point being that it’s far easier to tear things down than to build them up. Put another way, deconstruction is easier than reconstruction. And that’s not just true for houses. It’s also true theologically.”

Paul continued, “For the past several years, I’ve experienced the deconstruction of my faith. In other words, I’ve figured out what I don’t believe. You’ve heard all of this before, but I think it will help me to articulate it once again. Since I listened to you give theological lectures for three years in college, I figure it won’t hurt you to listen to me give one in return!”

“Fire away,” said Bill.

“First, like you, I deconstructed the religious-right fundamentalism of my youth. It didn’t take long for that to occur. For example, hard as I tried, I could not believe in biblical inerrancy.

“Soon after my conversion and baptism, I realized that if I had to take everything in the Bible literally, I could not be a Christian. Surely the earth isn’t only six thousand years

old. Surely God is not a petty, violent, genocidal deity. Surely God doesn't approve of slavery, the oppression of women, the death penalty for working on the Sabbath, or being a homosexual. I could go on, but I'm preaching to the choir on this point."

"Amen to that," Bill joked.

Paul continued, "Other tenants of religious-right evangelism also proved impossible to affirm. For example, I grew weary of the anti-science, anti-women, anti-gay, and anti-reason spirit that prevailed in that community. It offended me to hear religious leaders say that God commanded women to submit to their husbands and that women could not serve as ministers of the church.

"I grew tired of hearing that religious questions or doubts were sinful when Scripture is full of God's people struggling with their faith. I found the doctrine of hell especially repellent, as though God would actually torture people in burning flames for all eternity. That's not a god; that's a grotesque sadist.

"I also came to reject the idea that God needed a bloody sacrifice of his beloved Son before he would forgive human sin. That's a barbaric understanding. Also, the whole 'left behind' rapture theology of the second coming made me cringe. In one of your classes, you called the rapture 'biblical and theological pornography.'"

"I actually said that?" asked Bill.

"Yes, you did. And you were right."

"I also came to reject the idea that people who didn't, in the words of my high school pastor, 'accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior are eternally lost and condemned to a devil's hell.' Seventy percent of the world's population are not Christians. I could no longer believe God wrote all of them off as hopeless pagans.

"I also got fed up with the religious right's focus on personal sins like drinking, smoking, and sex outside of marriage, while they ignored social sins like racism,

injustice, destruction of the environment, and lack of care for the poor.

“I also became offended by the hyper-partisanship of conservative evangelicals. I actually heard a well-known pastor in our old denomination say, ‘I don’t see how a person can be a Democrat and still be a Christian.’ Nor could I believe that all ethical issues, including abortion, were totally black-and-white categories, as the religious right demands. Most ethical issues are ambiguous, with plenty of shades of gray.

“But, in the end, I think it was the overall negative, mean-spirited, hostile, exclusive, arrogant, and overwhelming judgmental spirit of evangelical leaders that finally turned me away from fundamentalism once and for all. When their key leaders said things like ‘God does not hear the prayer of a Jew,’ or ‘AIDS is God’s punishment for homosexuality,’ I knew I was done with the religious right.

“This kind of legalistic, intolerant, graceless religion is the exact opposite of the spirit, example, and teachings of Jesus, who clearly rejected this form of toxic faith. I believe religious-right religion has done unmeasurable damage in the world and has turned far more people away from Jesus than they ever reached for him.”

Paul paused for a moment. “Am I boring you yet?”

“Not yet,” Bill replied. “But I’m more interested in where you are headed next.”

“Then I’ll continue. My next deconstruction work proved much harder and took much longer. But eventually, I lost faith in traditional theology, just like that heretical Episcopal bishop I’ve been reading about. I can’t call his name at the moment.”

“Bishop Spong?” said Bill.

“Yes, that’s it.”

“You are right about him being a heretic. He’s pretty radical.”

“Maybe so,” Paul said, “But his recent book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, makes more sense to me than anything I’ve ever read before in the field of theology. Anyway, back to my point about losing faith in traditional religion.

“Bishop Spong says, ‘The heart cannot worship what the mind rejects.’ In a nutshell, that’s my story. It took a long time, but I finally concluded I could no longer believe the old doctrines. The concept of a God ‘out there’ who providentially cares for the world, who supernaturally intervenes, who answers prayers, and who performs miracles—these things are impossible for me to believe anymore.

“They do not reflect reality. I’ve never seen a miracle. I believe that’s because they don’t exist. These supernatural beliefs made sense in a prescientific world but not in the twenty-first century. God doesn’t make it rain or shine; weather patterns do. God doesn’t cause earthquakes; the collision of tectonic plates do. God doesn’t make people sick; germs do. Nor does God make them well; antibiotics do.

“God didn’t create the world in six days; it happened over billions of years through evolution. God is not a providential father; that’s what human beings needed to believe in the face of a scary world.

“And, as we’ve discussed before, once I lost faith in a traditional God, I lost faith in a divine Jesus who walked on water and ascended into the sky. It’s impossible for me to believe such fairy tale stories anymore. Spong is correct, ‘The heart cannot worship what the mind rejects.’

“On top of all these theological struggles, I also grew cynical about the church. I understand the institutional church has done a lot of good. But, as we’ve discussed before, the church has also done massive damage.

“Of course, none of this is new to you. I’ve talked to you many times about these issues before. I’m simply summarizing my theological deconstruction work of the past few years. You probably didn’t need to hear it again, but I needed to articulate it one more time.

“I also know you don’t agree with many of these conclusions, and that’s fine. I wish I didn’t agree with them. My life would have been a lot easier had I not lost my faith in traditional theology. In fact, losing my orthodox faith proved inconvenient on multiple levels.

“That’s an understatement if I ever heard one,” Bill responded.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that my theological deconstruction work is done. I don’t need to struggle any more with what I *don’t* believe. What I’m trying to figure out now is what I *do* believe. And, if you want to order some banana pudding and sit a while longer, I’ll try and explain that.”

“Banana pudding it is,” said Bill.

Chapter 49

Reconstruction

As Bill ate a bowl of banana pudding, Paul continued his theological reflections.

“A few weeks ago, I talked to an old Baptist preacher friend of mine. You don’t know him, but his name is Robert. Years ago Robert gave up on faith, declared his atheism, and moved beyond the world of religion. Robert, in town on business, looked me up, and we had dinner.

“During our visit, I told him many of the things I just told you. He responded, ‘If you have lost that much faith, is there anything left?’

“I said, ‘Actually, there’s quite a lot left.’ So we talked about that for over an hour, and it gave me new clarity about my beliefs.”

“I’d like to share some of those thoughts with you today. It’s just a first stab. I have a lot more reconstruction work to do. But I’ve come to realize that I have far more faith left in the tank than I realized.”

“This is getting more interesting by the minute,” said Bill. “Please continue.”

“For the past few years, I’ve called myself an agnostic. But that’s not actually true. I finally figured out that I *do* believe in God. Just not a traditional God. I don’t believe in the God of the fourth-century creeds, or the God of traditional Christian theology. In fact, I’m pretty much an atheist when it comes to most traditional concepts of God, including providence and miracles.

“But that does not mean God doesn’t exist. It just means, at least for me, that God is radically different than we’ve assumed throughout Christian history.

“I now believe in an evolutionary life-force, energy-force, and love-force God of the universe. This God is far too complex for me to fully comprehend, so I don’t try to

figure it all out. It's enough for me to simply say God is and live with a lot of ambiguities and unknowns.

Like Paul Tillich taught, I believe God is 'The Ground of Being.' Or, in the words of Acts 17, I believe in the one 'in whom we live and move and have our being.'"

Bill replied, "I must confess, Paul, this kind of God sounds fuzzy to me. On the other hand, it beats no God at all. But I need you to flesh out this concept a bit more. I don't fully comprehend what you are articulating."

"OK," said Paul. "Let's try this. Over the past year I did some research on the religious instincts of the earliest humans. In the beginning of the human race, people believed in God as an animating Spirit. They didn't try to understand all the details. They simply accepted that a Spirit existed in the universe they could not see or describe, but they believed that Spirit was real.

"However, over time, people began to humanize God. They made God out to be a fertile goddess, a powerful warrior, a great king, and then a loving father. They also attributed to God many of our negative human traits like jealousy, anger, violence, and vengeance.

"As the ancient Greek philosopher Xenophanes said, 'If horses had gods, they would look like horses.' The point is, over time people made God into our own human image.

"As the centuries went on, God became more and more human—only bigger, stronger, and wiser than actual humans. Eventually, in the final stages of Christianity, people made God into the ultimate human, Jesus of Nazareth.

"But none of these developments came from external divine revelation. These beliefs came from deeply felt human needs in a frightening world where a strong, parental, human-like God with supernatural powers could comfort and protect us from the scary bumps in the night, especially meaninglessness and death.

“So, given all that, the wise course of action for twenty-first-century theology, at least in my mind, is to *dehumanize* God. To allow God to be the mysterious animating Spirit that the earliest humans believed in, without all the human attributes. That’s the evolutionary life-force, love-force, energy-force God I believe in and stand in awe of.”

Bill responded to his friend. “As you might guess, I don’t fully agree with this concept of God. In fact, I don’t agree with much of any of it.”

“Fair enough,” Paul replied. “I didn’t expect you to convert immediately. I figured it would take at least a few weeks.”

They both laughed.

Bill said, “We can debate the merits of your new understanding of God another day. But I am curious, where does Jesus fit into all of this?”

“That’s a good question,” Paul said. “So let’s talk about Jesus. As I understand the gospel story, Jesus started out as a man who pointed people to God. But over time people eventually made him *into* a god, even though he discouraged them from doing so. We’ve discussed all of this before, so I won’t cover all of that territory again.

“But I’ve come to believe that just as we need to *dehumanize* God, we need to *rehumanize* Jesus. And it’s that human Jesus that I have faith in. Actually, if the church would redefine what it means by a ‘divine Christ,’ I could affirm that.

“For example, if Jesus’s divinity means he loved unconditionally, forgave boldly, included everybody into God’s family, and sought justice regardless of personal cost—then yes, I believe in a divine Jesus. But, redefining the word *divine* is a conversation for another day.”

Paul continued, “In spite of my doubts about a traditional divine Christ, I deeply admire the teaching, example, and spirit of the human Jesus. I still consider myself a devout follower of Jesus. In fact, I can honestly say I love Jesus, perhaps more

than ever before. He has a profound and compelling call upon my life that I can't fully understand, so I simply embrace his mystery."

Bill challenged his friend. "But if you jettison the divinity of Jesus, don't you lose a lot in the process? I mean, if Jesus was just a man, what's really left of Christianity?"

Paul responded, "My friend Robert wondered the same thing. He asked me, 'So, if you don't believe in a divine Christ, what do you believe in?' I told him I believed in Jesusanity. The term just spontaneously came to me. Don't worry, I'm not trying to start a new religion! We have enough religions in the world already.

"What I tried to share with Robert is that while I don't believe in the divine Christ anymore—at least not in the way we've historically defined his divinity—I do believe in the human Jesus. For example, I believe in Jesus's call to love, serve, care, and practice compassion.

"I believe in Jesus's example of inclusion and grace. I believe in Jesus's respect for women. I believe in Jesus's example of breaking down human barriers and prejudices. I believe in Jesus's challenge to forgive people who harm us.

"I believe in Jesus's command to seek justice in the world. I believe in Jesus's overwhelming love for the poor and marginalized of society, and I have dedicated my life and my vocation at the Help Center to that cause.

"And," Paul continued, "my faith goes beyond just following the example and teachings of Jesus as seen in the Gospels. I still affirm a lot of the Christian tradition. For example, I still value Christian practices like generosity, service, and gratitude. I continue to hold all of my old Christian values, including integrity, character, humility, and marital fidelity.

"And, I completely affirm the Christian mission to advance the kingdom of God 'on earth as it is in heaven.' I try to do that every single day in my small way at the Community Help Center."

“OK,” Bill said, “you’ve talked about God and Jesus, not that I agree with your conclusions. But, for the sake of the conversation, how does the church fit into this reconstructed theology of yours? Is there even a place for church anymore?”

Paul replied, “In spite of my deep frustrations with the church, I know many congregations still do good things, including providing friendship and community in a world that desperately needs it. My recent experience with members of Grace coming to the ICU when Joy had her accident was a vivid reminder of that.

“That event moved me beyond words. I’ve thought about it constantly since it occurred. So I’ve even come to a point where I’m open to the possibility of reconnecting with a church community. I don’t know if that will happen. But, in the right kind of progressive and open-minded congregation, it might.

“For example, even though Sarah doesn’t believe in supernatural events, she goes to her home church—Second Presbyterian—every Sunday. She tells me that’s where she first learned to ‘believe in God without all the hocus pocus.’ After all these years, I’ve pretty well ended up with the same theology as my wife. Wouldn’t you know it! So, I’m considering going with her to Second Presbyterian and checking them out. We’ll see.”

Paul paused for a moment and said, “That’s about it I guess. I’m still trying to figure all this out. I’m sorry I talked your head off today. All of these convoluted comments are my way of saying, I still have a lot of faith. Just not traditional faith. That’s the theological reconstruction work I’ve been working on, or at least trying to work on. I obviously have a lot of work left to do, but this is a start.”

Paul paused a moment and said, “And so ends the lecture!”

Bill said, “Obviously, this is a lot to take in. I’ll need time to mull it over. Although I don’t agree with much of what you’ve said, I appreciate your sharing it, and I look forward to continuing the conversation soon.”

“As do I,” Paul replied.

“So, who’s paying for lunch today?” Bill asked with a laugh.

Chapter 50

Pick the Fruit and Burn the Rest

In the summer of 2007, on their twenty-eighth wedding anniversary, and a few weeks after Paul's fiftieth birthday, Sarah and Paul went out to eat at Roy's Steak House, one of the finest restaurants in their city.

As they left home for the restaurant, Paul opened the car door for Sarah, took his place in the driver's seat, and put on his seat belt. He started up the engine, then turned on the CD to a song he selected for Sarah on this special occasion.

As they drove down the road, Paul serenaded his bride with Sam Cooke's old classic, "What a Wonderful World." As he sang the old lyrics to her about school romance, he emphasized the words "biology" and "science." As Sarah heartily laughed, Paul thought, *I hit the lottery jackpot of all time when I got Sarah Andrews to marry me.*

After placing their order at Roy's Steak House, Sarah said, "I talked to Hope this afternoon. She told me all about the faculty meeting with her new principal. Although this is his first high school principal position, Hope said her teacher friends at Lincoln Middle School said he did good work there. She's impressed with him and believes most of the other faculty members feel the same way."

"That's great to hear," Paul replied. Then he asked, "Did she say anything about Randall's CPA exam? Has he received his test results yet?"

"Not yet," said Sarah. "But I feel confident about his chances. He's such a bright young man. He and Hope are going to make great parents."

"It's hard to believe she's due in just a few months. I can't wait to be a grandfather. And you're going to be a fabulous grandmother."

"I hope so," said Sarah, "although I still feel a bit too young for that."

“Maybe so,” replied Paul, “but I’m glad to see it coming. With Joy starting med school this fall, it’s likely a long time before she blesses us with any grandkids.”

“All in due time,” Sarah said.

As they reflected on their twenty-eight years of marriage, Paul said, “All in all, we’ve had a good life together.”

“So far,” Sarah added with a laugh.

When they arrived back home, Sarah gave Paul that look. She said, “If you’ll come to the bedroom, I’ll give you your anniversary present.”

Paul replied, “I’m on my way!”

Later that night, after Sarah fell asleep, Paul slipped out of bed and went to Hope’s old bedroom, which now served as a home office for both Sarah and him. He took out a letter Bill sent him a few days earlier, and read it a second time.

Hi Paul,

Enclosed is a copy of a devotional I came upon a few days ago that meant a lot to me. Given our mutual history in the Southern Baptist Convention, I thought you would appreciate it. The author of the devotional adapted it from a story by John Claypool. I’d like for us to talk about it at our next lunch at Fred’s.

Until then, Bill

Paul pulled out the brief devotional Bill sent him. John Claypool, well known for his speaking and writing abilities, used to serve as a Southern Baptist pastor. For the same reasons Paul did, John Claypool left the Baptist church and became an Episcopal priest. Paul, who heard Claypool speak on several occasions and read some of his books, was always impressed by his insights. He slowly read the devotional again.

Picking the Fruit and Burning the Rest

A few years ago, I heard an Episcopal priest named John Claypool tell a story about his grandfather that profoundly impacted my life. For decades, a beautiful plum tree stood in the backyard of John Claypool's grandfather's house. The tree was the prize of the farm and the pride of John's grandfather.

Then one day a severe storm swept through the community. The storm destroyed many trees, including that plum tree. The violent winds ripped the tree from its roots and left it lying lifeless on its side.

After the storm blew over, people ventured outside to survey the damage. Before long a few neighborhood men gathered in John Claypool's grandfather's yard. They stood in a silent circle, gazing down at the once beautiful plum tree, now ruined beyond repair.

Finally, one of the men asked John's grandfather, "What are you going to do with that tree?" After a long pause the old man replied, "I'm going to pick the fruit and burn the rest."

John Claypool, who survived many trials of his own, including the death of his daughter, a divorce, and the loss of his career in the Baptist church, went on to say that "picking the fruit and burning the rest" is the best response we can make to life's wounds, storms, and losses.

First, Claypool says, we need to pick the fruit from the struggle, including new sensitivities, insights, and discoveries. Then we need to burn the rest, including any anger, grief, or bitterness. Finally, said Claypool, we need to move forward with our life.

These thoughts by John Claypool have helped me immensely on both a personal and professional level in recent years. So I want to encourage you, like John Claypool, to follow his grandfather's wise advice to "pick the fruit and burn the rest."

After reading the devotional, Paul pulled out his journal and, as he often did, wrote a late-night entry.

June 9, 2007: Over the past three days, I've been reflecting on John Claypool's advice to "pick the fruit and burn the rest," especially as it relates to my previous work as a pastor and as it relates to my experience in the Baptist church.

In spite of the many struggles I experienced in the Southern Baptist Convention, I know there's a lot of fruit to pick. They gave me some wonderful gifts for which I'll always be grateful. They taught me about Jesus, my inspiration and model for living.

When I was a lost and mixed-up teenager, they loved and affirmed me in ways my parents, for many reasons, could not. They provided me with a good education. And the churches I served, including Trinity, blessed me in numerous ways. I want to pick that fruit and carry it with me the rest of my life.

On the other hand, the Baptist church inflicted a lot of pain on me, especially during the fundamentalist takeover. I carried a lot of disappointment, anger, and bitterness over that loss for a long time. I think I've let most of it go. However, I'm sure I still have some work to do in order to fully "burn the rest."

My ten years in the United Church of Christ and at Grace was almost all "picking the fruit." I'll forever be grateful for what they gave me. Oh, there were a few disappointments along the way, like Grace's refusal to bless gay unions on church property. But all in all, they deeply blessed me, Sarah, and the girls.

Traditional institutional religion is no longer my story or my career. But, in spite of some negatives, it enriched my life in many ways. It offered me meaningful work and provided a living for me and my family for many years. Like John Claypool, I want to "pick the fruit and burn the rest." That seems the only appropriate response to my life and vocation in the church.

As to the present, I can barely believe my good fortune. I have Sarah, my daughters, a fine son-in-law, and a granddaughter on the way. I have several close friends, especially Bill and Richard. And I have a vocation that I love at the Community Help Center. I'm still amazed I get paid to do this job!

As I look back on fifty years of life and twenty-eight years of marriage, I'm exceptionally thankful for the ride. And, as I look to the future, I'm full of hope. So, dear God, whoever you ultimately are, I offer you my heartfelt gratitude.

I guess that's about it for tonight. I want to get back to my 'hardheaded woman,' whom, even after twenty-eight years of marriage, I love beyond words.

Chapter 51

Unexpected Invitation

Paul liked Reverend Ellen Sutton the first day he met her. Ellen, the new pastor at Sarah's home church, got involved at the Help Center soon after she arrived at Second Presbyterian.

Although corporate sponsors still provided the lion's share of financial support to the center, Paul's long-term ecumenical relationships throughout the city resulted in a growing number of congregational partnerships, including a large number of clergy and lay volunteers.

Ellen became a regular fixture at the Center. Her sharp wit, kind demeanor, authentic compassion, and enthusiastic support for the cause deeply impressed Paul. It didn't hurt that she shared his love for classic soft rock music and his enthusiasm for movies.

They had several conversations about recent film releases, including *The Davinci Code* and *The Pursuit of Happyness*. And they both got a huge kick out of the "Dear Baby Jesus" prayer scene at the dinner table by Will Ferrell in *Talladega Nights*.

Sarah loved her new pastor. "You need to come and hear Ellen preach," Sarah told Paul on several occasions. "She's excellent. You would like her."

"Maybe one day I will," Paul said.

"I'm going to hold you to that," Sarah replied.

* * *

Several months after she began volunteering at the Center, Ellen asked Paul, "Do you have a few minutes to talk?"

"Certainly," he replied. "Let's go to my office."

After taking a seat, Ellen said, “I’m wondering if you would come to Second Presbyterian and speak.”

“I’d be happy to do that,” said Paul. “I often visit churches to talk to senior adult groups, church boards, youth groups, mission teams, and various committees, and tell them about our work here at the Center. What group would you like me to speak to?”

“The entire group,” Ellen replied.

“What exactly do you mean?” asked Paul, confused by her statement.

“I’d like for you to preach during a Sunday morning worship service.”

For a moment, Paul looked like a deer in a headlight.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said, “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Ellen asked. “You used to be a pastor, didn’t you? I understand you served at Grace UCC for over a decade.”

“That was a different time in my life.”

“Well, we still want you to come and preach.”

“I appreciate the invitation, but I don’t do that anymore.”

Ellen once again asked, “Why not?”

Paul, feeling pressured, honestly replied, “Because I don’t believe anymore.”

“What don’t you believe anymore?”

“I don’t believe in traditional orthodox theology anymore.”

“So,” asked Ellen, “What *do* you believe?”

In spite of his discomfort with the conversation, Paul said, “I believe in the call of Jesus to love and serve others, especially the poor.”

“So, how about coming to Second Presbyterian Church and preaching on *that*?”

Paul stalled. “Let me think about it for a while, and I’ll get back with you.”

“When might that be?” asked Ellen.

She sure is pushy, Paul thought.

“I’ll call you later this week.”

* * *

In the end, with Sarah’s encouragement, Paul reluctantly agreed to the request.

“After all,” Sarah said, “Second Presbyterian was the first church to partner with the Help Center. They also provide your organization with a lot of volunteers and a significant amount of financial support. Plus, you’ve mentioned on several occasions that you would eventually come to my home church for a visit. This is a good opportunity to do so.”

As usual, Paul found it difficult to say no to his wife.

Chapter 52

Guest Preacher

Several weeks later, in the fall of 2007, Paul sat on the front row of Second Presbyterian Church during their Sunday morning worship service. He declined to sit in one of the clergy chairs in the chancel area with Ellen, and he did not wear a robe. He felt more nervous than he had in years.

However, the service soon felt familiar. It wasn't all that different from Grace Church, although a bit more formal. They used inclusive language for God, and some of the traditional liturgy had been updated, which Paul appreciated. He began to feel more comfortable.

Reverend Ellen Sutton stood to read the scripture lesson Paul had chosen. Before the reading of the text, she said, as Paul suggested, "In Matthew 25:34-40, Jesus tells a story about the last judgment. In that story he doesn't say we'll be judged on our faith or theology. Instead, Jesus says we'll be judged based on how we treated people in need. In this passage Jesus said:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (NRSV)

As Ellen sat down, Paul walked up and stood behind the pulpit, his heart pounding. He had not preached a sermon or been in church for six years. He looked out at the congregation, including Sarah, Joy and her husband Randall, Hope and her boyfriend Seth, and Sarah's parents. Even Bill Sanford and Richard Mosely showed up for the big event.

Paul looked at his wife. Sarah's enthusiastic smile helped calm him down. He spoke for a few minutes about the work of the Community Help Center and thanked the congregation for their generous support.

Paul then said, "There is no ambiguity in today's Scripture passage. Jesus is clear. *The best way to serve God is to serve others.* When we do, according to this parable, it's the same as serving Jesus himself. All of which reminds me of one of my favorite stories, an ancient Jewish legend. It's called 'The Bread and the Ark.' I'd like to share it with you today.

"At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Jews were expelled from Spain. Many went to France, Germany, Greece; and some went to the Holy Land. Among them was Jacoby, a shoemaker by trade. Jacoby was a kind man, but most of all Jacoby was a devout man. He went to the synagogue every Sabbath and listened to what the rabbi said, even though Jacoby spoke Spanish and the rabbi spoke Hebrew.

"One Sabbath the rabbi mentioned in his sermon how at one time loaves of bread were offered to God. Jacoby heard and understood the words bread and God, and he got excited. After Sabbath worship, on their walk home, he said, 'Esperanza! Guess what? God eats bread! And you are the best baker in the whole country! This week make your best bread, and I'll bring it to God.'

"That week Esperanza kneaded in the best ingredients and braided the dough with such love. Jacoby then took the seven loaves of bread to the synagogue. 'Senior Dios,' Jacoby said to God. 'I've got your bread. You will love it. My wife Esperanza, she's a wonderful baker! You'll eat every crumb!' Then Jacoby took the bread and put it into the holy ark where they kept the scrolls of Holy Scripture.

“No sooner did Jacoby leave than in came the shammes, the man who cleans up the synagogue. ‘Lord, you know I want to be here in this holy place; that’s all I want to do. But for seven weeks now I haven’t been paid. Lord, I need for you to make me a miracle. I believe you’re going to; maybe you have done it already. Maybe I’ll open the holy ark, and there will be my miracle.’

“He walked to the ark and opened it, and there was his miracle. Seven loaves of bread! Enough for the whole week. The next day, when the rabbi opened up the ark and Jacoby and Esperanza saw that the bread was gone, you should have seen the look of love that passed between them.

“The next week it was the same. And the week after. This went on for months. The shammes learned to have faith in God, but he also realized that if he came to the synagogue too early, there was no miracle. And so thirty years went by.

“Now an old man, Jacoby came one day to the synagogue with his loaves of bread. ‘Senior Dios,’ he prayed, ‘I know your bread’s been lumpy lately. Esperanza’s arthritis—maybe you could do something? You’ll eat better!’”

“He put the bread in the ark and started to leave when suddenly the rabbi grabbed him. ‘What are you doing?’ the rabbi demanded.”

“I’m bringing God his bread,’ Jacoby replied.”

“God doesn’t eat bread!’ said the rabbi.”

“Jacoby said, ‘He’s been eating Esperanza’s bread for thirty years.’”

“The two men heard a noise, and they hid.”

“No sooner did they hide than in came the shammes. ‘I hate to bring it up, Lord, but you know your bread’s been lumpy lately. Maybe you could talk to an angel.’ When the

shammes reached into the ark for the loaves of bread, the rabbi jumped out and grabbed him.

“The rabbi angrily told the two men that what they were doing was sinful, going on and on, and all three men began to cry. Jacoby began to cry because he only wanted to do good. The rabbi cried because his sermon thirty years ago had caused this. And the shammes cried because he realized there would be no more bread.

“Suddenly they heard laughter from the corner. They turned and saw the great mystic Rabbi Isaac. Shaking his head and laughing, Rabbi Isaac said, ‘No Rabbi, these men are not sinful. These men are devout!’

“You should know that God has never had more pleasure than watching what goes on in your synagogue. On the Sabbath he sits with his angels, and they laugh, watching this man bring the bread and the other man take the bread, while God gets all the credit! You must beg forgiveness of these men, Rabbi.’”

“Rabbi Isaac looked at Jacoby and said, ‘Jacoby, you must do something even more difficult. You must now bring your bread directly to the shammes, and when you do, you must believe with perfect faith that it is the same as giving it to God.’”

Paul paused, then repeated the closing line of the story with emphasis: *“You must now bring your bread directly to the shammes, and when you do, you must believe with perfect faith that it is the same as giving it to God.”*

He then concluded, “That sounds a lot like another rabbi named Jesus, a man who said, ‘To the extent that you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me.’ May that be true in your life, in mine, and in the life of this good church. Amen.”

Paul then left the pulpit, walked down the center of the aisle, sat with his family in one of the front pews, and placed his hand in Sarah’s hand.

A few moments later, the ushers brought Communion elements from the back of the

church. Reverend Ellen Sutton began to lead her congregation in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Paul had not bargained for this. He immediately felt torn.

Should I go down with my family and take Communion or not?

On the one hand, he felt doing so would be hypocritical. After all, he didn't believe traditional theology any more, including most of the words of the Apostles' Creed the congregation affirmed just a few minutes earlier.

On the other hand, Paul thought, *I do believe, deeply, in the person of Jesus, especially his call to love and serve others, through which, we are connected to God.*

At that moment, one of the ushers came to the end of the Paul's pew. She indicated with her hand that it was their turn to come forward for the elements of Communion. Paul still felt ambivalent, not sure what to do.

At first, he remained in his seat, while his family slipped by him on their way out of the pew, toward the aisle, where they would walk to the chancel area and receive the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

At the last possible moment, Paul joined Sarah and the rest of his family as they left the pew and walked down the aisle to the chancel rail. As Reverend Ellen Sutton handed him a piece of bread saying, "The body of Christ, given for you," Paul recited his favorite Bible verse to himself: *"Lord I believe; help my unbelief."*



If you would like to read an interview of the author about this novel, [click here](#).

If you would like to receive email notifications about future books, articles, and posts on Doubter's Parish, [click here](#).