

# Leaving the Faith

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By the early to mid-1990s I had come to think that whatever I had held dear and cherished on the basis of my belief in the Christian God, could still be held dear and cherished without that belief. Do I stand in awe before the unfathomable vastness and incredible majesty of the universe? Do I welcome and feel heartfelt gratitude for moments of grace? Do I value the love of family and the companionship of friends? Do I appreciate the many good things in life: My work? Travel? Good food and good drink? All the little things that make life enjoyable? Yes, but what does any of this necessarily have to do with God?

As a Christian – from the time I was able to think, through my teenage and early-twenties fundamentalist period, up to my more mature adult liberal phase – I had believed in some form of the traditional, biblical God. This was a God who was not some kind of remote designer of the universe who had gotten the ball rolling and then stood aloof from everything he had created. This was a God who was active in the world. He loved people and was intent on showering his love on them. He helped them when they were in need. He answered their prayers. He intervened in this world when it was necessary and important to do so.

But I had come very much to doubt that any such God existed. And it was the problem of suffering that had created these doubts and that eventually led me to doubt it so much that I simply no longer believed it. If God helps his people – why doesn't he help his people? If he answers prayer, why doesn't he answer prayer? If he intervenes, why doesn't he intervene?

It was innocent suffering that made me think there is no such God. People who are faithful to God, who devote their lives to him, who pray to him suffer no less than those who are indifferent to God or even scornful toward his existence. When a tsunami kills 300,000 people, the believers are included along with the unbelievers. No difference. When a child starves to death, as happens every seven seconds, her prayers are never answered. When a Holocaust kills many millions of people, the Chosen people are not exempt. Just the opposite.

I came to think that it was very easy indeed for me as a middle class, white male, with a good career as a university professor, a loving wife and two terrific young kids, a house to live in and never any concerns about having enough to eat, plenty of money to buy cars and TVs and computers and ... and all that, it was very easy for me to be grateful to God and to think that he acted on my behalf to provide me with the good things in life. But what about those who are no better than me and who pray no less fervently than me who are watching their children die of dysentery, who are sold to be sex slaves, who see the drought and the famine come and know there's not a solitary thing they can do to avoid starving to death along with everyone they know and love?

It's easy to believe that God intervenes for you when you live a basically happy and fulfilled life. And yes, I know the typical response: that faith in God is especially important for those who are in the midst of suffering, that it provides them hope, that without it they would simply despair. But the reality is that most of these people despair anyway. How can they not? They are suffering in extremis and are about to die in agony. Not much to be thankful for.

And even if it's true that faith might provide them with some solace, that doesn't make their faith \*true\* or the God whom they hope will intervene on their behalf \*real\*. It is their faith and hope that provides solace, not the divine being who supposedly could help them if he wanted to. Those of us on the outside observing these deaths – millions and millions of deaths – need ourselves to ask whether there is any reason to think that there is a God who is active in this world.

And I came to think that it was perverse of me to be thankful for all the good things I had – as if God had provided them to me – when I knew full well that millions of people were dying from diseases contracted from not having clean water to drink; and from malaria; and from the lack of just the most basic protections against weather; and from starvation; and from natural disasters; and and and. If God is the one to be thanked for my good life, who is to be thanked – or rather blamed – for their suffering? Do I really want to say that it is God who has blessed me? If so, has he decided to curse the others? Or am I simply favored because I'm such a nice guy?

I got to a point where I just didn't believe it any more. This wasn't because I was a biblical scholar who knew that the Bible was deeply flawed as a very human book filled with contradictions, discrepancies, and mistakes. All that was irrelevant. It also wasn't because I was a historian of early Christianity who realized that traditional Christian faith developed as the result of historical and cultural forces, not divine guidance, that there was a huge variety of conflicting Christian views in its early years, decades, and centuries, and that what we know of Christianity is more or less the result of historical accident. That too was irrelevant.

What was relevant was the very heart of the Christian claim that God loves his people, answers their prayers, and intervenes when they are in need. I came to think there was no such God, and decided that I had no choice but to abandon my faith and leave the Christian tradition.