

# Life after God

FINDING FAITH WHEN YOU  
CAN'T BELIEVE ANYMORE

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*To the professor with the loaded finger gun*

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# Chapter 1



## “shh”

### the problem of god

You see the beauty of God and you can't say no.

You see the suffering of the world  
and you can't stop asking why.

But how do you say yes and dare to ask why  
and still call it belief  
even as you doubt and  
sometimes despair over this beautiful life?  
Over this broken world?

You deconstruct.  
Then you rebuild.

And what is deconstructing and rebuilding  
and rebuilding over and over,  
again and again—but an act of faith?

## THE DAY OF THE GUN

I'm sitting in a seminary professor's office one afternoon when, all at once, he pulls a gun on me.

He fishes it out of his desk drawer,  
points it at my chest, leisurely pulls back the hammer,  
and asks me if I believe in God.

It's all so completely unexpected and so seemingly  
out of character for a professor who is, by all accounts,

a vegan and

a pacifist and

is known for being really into the universe and

having lots of houseplants and

smoking peyote in the desert and

practicing tai chi and

commuting to campus

on an old Schwinn Wayfarer ten-speed and

wearing a tan corduroy sport jacket

with those brown leather elbow patches.

He is *that* kind of professor.

And he is unquestionably one of the greatest  
theological minds of his generation.

And he keeps a loaded handgun in his desk drawer?

The fact that it's a finger gun—imaginary and make-  
believe—in no way diminishes the gravity of the situation.

That I simply do not see any of it coming causes  
surprising panic. That it comes at the most inconvenient  
time in my life sparks an immediate crisis of faith.

Because I already know what I believe about God. I don't  
need to stare down the barrel of a finger gun to find the  
truth or see the light or test my faith.

I'm 22 years old and

I've been a Christian all my life and  
I have experienced what a pastor friend says is a  
*call to ministry* and  
I have an undergraduate degree in religious studies,  
so I've read Augustine and Aquinas,  
Barth and Tillich,  
Ruether and Cone and Gutiérrez.

I've even read some Kierkegaard—which is how I know  
the gun is ironic.

From behind his cluttered desk, the professor points his  
loaded finger gun at me and asks if I believe in God.

What?

A bewildering, disorienting intrusion.

The professor asks me again if I believe in God.

“What? Yes . . .”

The professor then asks me if the God I believe in  
is an all-loving God.

“What?”

I hesitate and splutter and tell the professor  
that I believe God is love and  
it's the nature and character of God to love and  
I'd read this somewhere in 1 John and  
I remember a theologian referring to this as God's  
*omnibenevolence*.

The professor is unamused by my dubious mastery of  
orthodox theological concepts.

He asks me if the God I believe in is an all-powerful God.

And I ask him if by all-powerful he means *omnipotent* as  
in, capable of doing anything and limited by nothing and in  
control of everything.

And waving his finger gun back and forth, the professor says that by all-powerful he means all of that and also capable of intervening supernaturally in the ordinary events of the natural world which, in my current situation, he says, implies that God has the power to somehow stop the imaginary bullet in his imaginary gun from entering my actual body in the fraction of a second after he pulls the imaginary trigger.

And when I tell the professor that I believe God is omnipotent and has the power to intervene supernaturally in the ordinary events of the natural world, I am suddenly and acutely aware that this entire conversation seems to be unfolding just as the professor had planned.

It's almost like he's done this before—  
maybe even dozens of times:  
an unsuspecting seminary student,  
the prescheduled office hours visit,  
the loaded finger gun,  
the pointed questions.

He asks me how confident I am, at this moment, that God actually will intervene supernaturally to stop the bullet from entering my chest once he pulls the trigger.

And I confess to him that if this was more than a purely hypothetical situation, that if the gun was real and really loaded, and if the trigger was really pulled, I cannot say that I would be highly confident in God's bullet-intervening supernatural power.

He then reminds me of my earlier assertion—that God is love and all-loving—and asks me how confident I am that God truly desires the absolute best for me.

And I say that I am mostly highly confident that God truly desires the absolute best for me.

And it's here that the professor takes a pause in the



action to summarize for me what seems to be my current predicament, which is that the professor has just pulled the trigger, the bullet has now left the chamber, God is all-loving and desires the best for me, God is all-powerful and can intervene supernaturally in the ordinary events of the world, and yet the bullet has just entered my chest, and I am now in quite serious pain, so how can both statements about God be true?

And I say I do not know because I have just been shot, and given this highly unanticipated predicament, I'm having trouble thinking clearly right now and what exactly is the dilemma?

And the professor returns the finger gun to his desk drawer and says the dilemma is inherently clear.

If God could have prevented this tragedy but chose not to, then can we really say with confidence that God is entirely all-loving and good?

And if God could not have prevented this tragedy, then can we really say that God is entirely all-powerful?

And because I do not lack for confidence, I believe I know just enough in this moment to resolve said dilemma.

I tell the professor that this is precisely where free will comes into play.

God creates us with the capacity for doing and experiencing both good and evil, but God can't give us the freedom to do and experience evil things and at the same time prevent us from actually doing or experiencing evil things because isn't free will an expression of divine love?

The professor stares at me  
with a complete lack of surprise.

He invites me to imagine this scenario:  
A toddler is crawling perilously, unwittingly close to the  
edge of a sheer cliff and there is nothing to stop the  
toddler's tragic fall except for a rock pile hundreds of feet  
below.

When the mother and father suddenly spot the toddler  
approaching the cliff, the mother jumps to her feet and  
attempts to rescue her son before he tumbles over it.

But the father abruptly stops the mother and says,  
"I know we could intervene to save our son,  
but do we really want to rob him of his free will?"

The professor pauses.

He asks me if I would call that father a loving father,  
if it's even possible to call that father a powerful father,  
if, in fact, he has imposed limits on his own power to act.

I can see that my free will card isn't playing, so I drop the  
next best card in my hand.

I say maybe this whole gun incident is part of God's plan,  
that there must be some greater good that will come out  
of it, something we cannot see now, from our human,  
earthly vantage point.

Maybe what we cannot comprehend today will make  
complete sense someday.

Maybe we will eventually see how it all worked for good.  
Maybe, given enough time, we will even be strangely  
thankful it happened.

The professor informs me that the word for this  
theological concept is *omniscience*.

It's the idea that God knows all things—  
everything that has ever happened in the past,

everything that is happening right here and now,  
and everything that will ever happen in the future.  
Yesterday, today, and tomorrow are all  
one eternal moment,  
already known by God,  
already destined by God,  
already fulfilled by God.

I tell the professor that maybe this omniscience concept  
explains why the Bible says  
all things work for good and  
everything happens for a reason and  
God knows the plans he has for us.

And the professor laughs and says he's trying hard, really  
hard, not to pull out that gun from his desk drawer and  
shoot me again.

And then he reminds me of my now seriously urgent and  
tragically unfolding situation:  
I have been shot and  
I have a bullet in my chest and  
I am bleeding out and  
this is not going to end well for me.

He asks me if, in the brief time I still have left in this  
earthly life, I'm perhaps starting to question why an  
all-loving, all-powerful God would not have chosen to  
accomplish his so-called plan  
by more loving, less unnecessarily painful  
and deadly means.

And I say when you put it that way it does seem a bit  
extreme but this is what we call the *mystery* of faith.

It's the last card in my hand. The celebrated *mystery* card  
that Christians casually and smugly throw down when  
faith and reason become uncomfortably irreconcilable.

The moment I play the mystery card the professor leans in

and asks me if I have a family, and I tell him I have a wife and a mother and a father and a sister.

He asks me if it would bring comfort to them if, upon informing them of my untimely death, he told them this tragedy was all part of God's plan and everything happens for a reason and they will just have to accept the mystery of it.

And I tell him please, please, do not ever say that to them or to anyone.

He asks me what then *should* he say to my family.

And I tell him that maybe first he should tell my family that he's sorry for shooting me.

And after he says he's sorry for shooting me, he should not say anything more, because what can you say at a time like that, and what can you do in a moment like that?

Except cry and  
breathe and  
hold space and  
keep silent?

The professor nods.

Then he announces that regular office hours are over.

## THEODICY

Driving home, I try to convince myself that none of what just transpired in the professor's office was real. The entire exercise was hypothetical, theoretical, academic. I cannot make sense of why I'm feeling a deep loss and strange sadness.

And then I remember a story I had heard about the seventeenth-century French theologian Blaise Pascal.

But before I tell you *that* story,  
there's *another* story about Pascal that maybe you've  
heard about—the one about how, early in his life and  
career, Pascal proposed that we should analyze the  
question of God's existence with a gambler's sense of  
logic and calculation.

Pascal argued that belief is a wager: either God exists, or  
God does not. Pascal said the odds are essentially 50-50.  
So, faced with even odds, and with everything else being  
equal, he said we can make our wager based solely on the  
potential payout or loss associated with believing.

If we bet that God exists, and we're right,  
we stand to gain eternity.

If we bet that God exists, and we're wrong,  
we would lose nothing.

If we bet that God does not exist,  
and God actually does exist, we might lose eternity.

If we bet that God does not exist, and it turns out  
God does not exist, then we gain nothing.

Assuming that mere *belief* in God is the all-determinative  
factor in gaining eternity, the gambler's calculation,  
motivated purely by payout, compels us to wager that God  
exists. We have nothing to lose by believing and being  
wrong, but everything to gain by believing and being right.

In Pascal's words, "Reason impels you to believe."<sup>1</sup>

When I first learned about Pascal's wager  
in a college philosophy class, I felt genuine sadness over  
what Pascal had made of faith, how he'd reduced the  
mystery and beauty and revelation of God to  
playing the odds and  
payouts and losses and  
reward and punishment and  
reason over belief.

Pascal's faith was devoid of spirit and love  
and wonder and joy.  
It was reduced to mere probabilities.

Driving home from the professor's office, I feel the same  
sadness I felt in that college philosophy class when I  
couldn't reconcile Pascal's spirit-barren claim that *reason  
impels you to believe*.

Only now, after my encounter with the professor, the  
sadness I feel emerges from a new fear that perhaps the  
opposite might be true—that *reason actually impedes your  
ability to believe*.

The professor had just made the case that God cannot be  
both all-loving and all-powerful. A reasonable faith implies  
that these two divine attributes are incompatible. At least  
one of them must be untrue.

I learned later that theologians refer to this conundrum as  
*theodicy*, from the Greek words *theos*, meaning God, and  
*dike* (pronounced dee-kay), meaning justice. Theodicy  
is the rational attempt to justify God's omnipotence  
and goodness in view of the existence of evil and the  
prevalence of suffering in the world.

Theodicy dares to ask why,  
in the midst of suffering,  
does God seem absent,  
silent, and  
even cruel?

This question of theodicy once led C.S. Lewis to write  
his well-known book, *The Problem of Pain*, to resolve this  
enduring theological puzzle. In it, Lewis wrote famously,  
"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our  
conscience, and shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone  
to rouse a deaf world."<sup>2</sup>

But later, after the death of his wife, Joy, Lewis

reconsidered his notorious *megaphone theodicy*. In his book *A Grief Observed*, as he pondered whether God might be the “Eternal Vivisector,” the “Cosmic Sadist, the spiteful imbecile,”<sup>3</sup> he confessed that, in the end, “you can’t see anything properly while your eyes are blurred with tears.”<sup>4</sup>

Yale professor and theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, following the death of his son, Eric, in a mountain-climbing accident at the age of 25, came to see theodicy not as an intellectual puzzle to solve but as an unwelcome, insoluble invasion to endure. “I do not know why God would watch [Eric] fall,” he wrote candidly. “I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess.”<sup>5</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Job is considered a work of theodicy. Job personifies our universal struggle to believe in God in the face of indefensible suffering and loss. Shaking his fist at God, he dares to ask what no one wants to ask, but everyone will likely ask some day,

(W)hat do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?  
Why have you made me your target?  
Why have I become a burden to you?<sup>6</sup>

For so many people, personal faith is often maimed or killed at the intersection of divine goodness and human suffering.

## JENGA

Driving home, it feels as if that one Jenga block that’s been holding up the entire tower of my faith system has now become irreversibly vulnerable, precarious, dubious.

What happens when you pull what seems irrational, like divine omnipotence, from the puzzle of faith?

The tower begins to wobble, sway, lean to one side.

That's when I remember this *other* story about Pascal and how, at the age of 31, he experienced a strange mystical vision of the divine that compelled him to abandon the world of reason and, as he said, "to live for God alone."

He died eight years later, having never told anyone about that transformative mystical experience.

But on the night it happened, he abruptly rejected reason as a basis for faith. He forsook his notorious gambler's logic and calculation in pursuit of a complete return to the Bible and divine revelation.

When Pascal died, his servant found sewn into his jacket a brief document titled "Memorial," which summarized his mystical experience and included the words—  
"God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars. . . . Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except God."<sup>7</sup>

Driving home, I remember that story and the sadness begins to subside, and my wobbling Jenga-like block tower of faith starts to straighten and settle again.

Forget the professor's reason and logic,  
the philosophers and scholars,  
the make-believe gun,  
the imaginary bullet in my chest,  
the glaring contradictions of my faith,  
the sad conversation with my family about a tragedy that never happened.

Forget the world and everything, except God.

But then I go to work the following morning. And I have no choice but to remember the world.



## WHAT'S REAL AND WHAT ISN'T

To make ends meet while in seminary, I worked as a phlebotomist at a county hospital, drawing blood from the arms of the poor and the indigent who do not have the luxury of forgetting about the world and everything except God.

Some are gang members with real bullets lodged in their brains and armed deputies guarding their rooms and bereft mothers praying the rosary by the bedsides of their comatose teenage sons.

Some are gay men and IV drug users secreted away in half-lit isolation rooms, suffering from a mysterious, leprous, fatal disease for which there is no cure, only shame and stigma and death.

Some are heroin addicts with track marks so scarred and calloused that my needle bends as I forage and fish futilely for a viable vein.

Some are innocent children who wandered too close to that sheer cliff the professor spoke about and tumbled over the edge and landed among the world's rock piles, suffering unimaginable tragedy and irrecoverable loss.

From the desperate moans of the burn unit to the shrieks of the incarceration ward, from the chaos of the ER to the quiet vigils on the ICU, I keep coming back to the questions sparked by that conversation in the professor's office.

How can one speak of an all-loving, all-powerful God amid such immeasurable suffering and human wreckage?

What can be said of God in this godforsaken place that will not offend the tender souls of the suffering?

How, here, can one forget the world and everything, except God?

Is it ever possible to say yes and dare to ask why  
and still call it belief  
even as you doubt and sometimes despair  
over this beautiful life?  
Over this broken world?

Within days of my conversation with the professor, my  
48-year-old father is diagnosed with terminal cancer.

Then, weeks later, a close friend, whose baby is due to be  
born the same week as ours, calls with the devastating  
news that his daughter has just been delivered stillborn.

Then, over the subsequent months,  
a hospital coworker is killed in a head-on collision and  
my best friend's sister is sexually assaulted and  
American troops are invading Iraq and  
Kurt Cobain swore he didn't have a gun  
but it turns out he did and  
a hurricane kills 65 people in Florida and  
four LAPD officers are acquitted for beating  
Rodney King and  
the City of Los Angeles is burning.

And my father is dying.

And that's when I can see what is real and what isn't real.

In the real world  
the gun is real and  
the bullet is real and  
the questions are real and  
the glaring contradictions of our faith are real and  
the inexplicable evil and suffering in the world is real.

How can the world and everything except God be  
forgotten?

And what isn't real  
is the only God I have ever known—

the all-powerful, all-knowing, changeless,  
and timeless God  
that sometimes seemingly  
does not care or  
does not intervene or  
does not understand or  
does not feel.  
Or does not exist.

## WHO SAID THAT?

My faith meant everything until it didn't, and suddenly I'm afraid and even ashamed of what that means, because I'm studying to be a pastor and everything in my life has been leading to this *calling*.

And who, by the way, goes to seminary  
and loses their faith?

That's when I remember that line from Samuel Beckett,  
"You must go on. I can't go on. I will go on."

And I tell myself that I want to believe,  
that I still believe,  
that I don't know what I believe.  
But I will try to believe.

And that's when I hear someone or something say, *Shh!*

I don't know exactly who or what said it,  
or where it even came from.  
But it stabbed.  
It shamed.  
It silenced.

It may have been my own conscience. It may have been  
the church, or a preacher, a friend or mentor, or someone

who knew and loved and depended on me. It may have been my imagined future.

But it wasn't my imagination.

"Shh!"

What? Why, *Shh*?

Because we don't talk about these things.

I tell you all of this because chances are the *Shh!* is as real for you as it was for me, and because there is for all of us the gun and the bullet and the questions and the contradictions and the faint sound of your own voice whispering, "I want to believe but I don't know what I believe or how to believe."

Maybe you see the beauty of God and you can't say no, but you see the suffering of the world and you can't stop asking why.

Maybe you believe and doubt and despair and you want to know that even this is faith.

But then someone, something, some collective voice says, *Shh!* And then you stop asking why. And then you stop saying yes. And then you just stop believing.

But what is deconstructing and rebuilding and rebuilding over, again and again, but an act of faith?

## THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

There's a *New Yorker*-type cartoon that depicts a group of people sitting politely on couches in a small room, all staring blankly at each other, pretending to ignore the massive elephant sitting in the lap of one of them, whose name we're about to learn is Alan.

The giant pachyderm is crushing Alan, but no one in the room is doing anything about it.

Below, the caption reads: "Only Alan was prepared to acknowledge the elephant in the room."

There's a glaring truth sitting elephant-like in the hearts of a growing number of people today.

Perhaps it sits in your heart.

No one wants to talk about it, but we all know it's there.

It's an uncomfortable truth. Pollsters have surveyed it. Experts have written volumes about it. Empty pews in so many churches have confirmed it. And more and more of us are finally naming it.

This elephant-in-the-room,  
unsettling truth  
is that we have a God problem in the modern world.  
It's not a problem with *God*  
so much as it's a problem with what Christianity has  
made of God,  
how Christianity has conceived of God,  
and the claims that Christians have made about God.

This God problem is not one of experience but of perception. More and more people are actively pursuing spiritual experiences and holy encounters that cultivate joy, meaning, purpose, and beauty in their lives. They're giving more attention to their spirituality and to spiritual practices than ever before.

They're just not doing it within the conventional structures of organized Christianity.

Twenty-seven percent of U.S. adults (one in four) now say they think of themselves as "spiritual but not religious," up 8 percentage points in five years.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, 63 percent (two in three) of U.S. adults self-identify as Christians, down from 75 percent (three in four) a decade ago.<sup>9</sup>

Maybe you're one of the growing number of people who identify as *spiritual but not religious*—the *SBNRs*, as demographers have come to call them.

Maybe you're not so much living life *without* God, but living life *after* the God you can no longer believe in.

Many so-called *SBNRs* can no longer reconcile the all-loving, all-powerful, all-knowing God they've been told about and taught about with their real, lived experience of God in the world. Their doubts, questions, and suspicions had been silenced and condemned for so long that the elephant in the room just kept getting bigger and heavier and more harmful to them.

Until finally, they simply chose to leave the room to pursue life after God.

But imagine if, instead of silently watching them leave the room, we were brave enough to evict the elephant.

Imagine if, without the elephant, we suddenly found the real God who's been with us all along—  
a God who is found in the ancient stories of the Bible, yet whom we have largely ignored in favor of another.

Only when we can dare to live life after a God we can no longer believe in can we be freed to live life in pursuit of a God we were never told about—

a God who persuades out of love  
rather than coerces out of power,  
who feels what we feel and responds accordingly,  
who is both unchanging yet ever-changing, and  
who is too busy offering new possibilities  
in the unfolding present  
to confine our futures to a predetermined plan.

What if the real God of the Bible is working for us  
and with us,  
experiencing and responding to us,  
wooing us and waiting for us  
on the other side of life after the only God  
we've ever known?

## DON'T SHUSH ME

The Biosphere 2 project is an American Earth system science research facility located in Oracle, Arizona. It was created to serve as a center for research and teaching about Earth's living systems and its place in the universe. It's an artificial, materially closed ecological system—otherwise known as a *vivarium*. It remains the largest closed ecological system ever created.

But one of the most profound discoveries made by the scientists had nothing to do with a cure for some new disease or innovative methods of farming and ecology.

Instead, the discovery had to do with the role of wind in the lives of trees.

The trees inside Biosphere 2 grew rapidly—more rapidly than they did outside of the dome.

But they also fell over before reaching maturation.

After examining the root systems and outer layers of their bark, scientists came to realize that a lack of wind

in Biosphere 2 caused a deficiency of stress wood. Stress wood helps a tree position itself for optimal sun absorption; it also helps trees grow more solidly. Without stress wood, a tree can grow quickly, but it cannot support itself fully. It cannot withstand normal wear and tear and survive.

Trees need some resistance to thrive over time.

So it is with faith.

Doubts, questions, resistance, finger guns and hard conversations, and county hospitals are vital to the soul. Without them, the roots of our faith run shallow. We stumble and tumble over.

There's an ancient story about a man named Jacob who has this extraordinary dream. In the dream Jacob is given to see that his whole life has meaning and purpose beyond what he had previously imagined.

Before the dream, he wonders, like all of us:

Where did we come from?

How did we get here?

What are we doing here?

Where are we going?

How are we getting there?

In the dream, Jacob sees that he's a part of something bigger than his own story—and yet his own story is indispensable to the ways in which God's bigger, more expansive story will ultimately unfold. Jacob's life has a purpose within some larger purpose.

When he awakens from the dream, he says, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!"<sup>10</sup>

The Jewish sages taught that Jacob's story suggests there's another world—a dimension of the spiritual—right here within this world, that lies open to us whenever we awaken to it and pay attention to it. Like Joseph, we can



access that world from this world, if only we can learn to see differently.

Sometimes we need a changed perception to discover that God has been here all along.

Sometimes we need to awaken to a whole new awareness of who God is and where God is and how God relates to us and why we are here and where all of this is going.

Jacob's story reminds us that we don't have to leave the room to wake up.

We only have to evict the elephant that shames and denies and silences our very real, lived experience—the elephant that says, *Shh!*

Only then can we keep saying yes to the beauty of God and keep asking our whys to the suffering of the world and keep daring still to call that faith and keep saying to the elephant, "Don't shush me."