

**Search  
for  
Eternal  
Life**



# CHAPTER 1

The alarm sounded. David flung the covers aside and leapt across the room to silence his clock. After a few seconds, the fog of sleep lifted, and he remembered what day it was: Monday, February 1, the first day of a new semester. David pulled back the curtains from his bedroom window and saw that the snow had stopped falling. Looked like four inches. Peering toward the street, he saw that it had already been plowed, which was a relief. He could handle his driveway not being shoveled since it sloped downhill, and he could crash through the bank the snowplow had left. He wouldn't have to worry about shoveling until this evening.

After a shower, David sat down in his kitchen for a bowl of cold cereal. He flipped on the radio to listen for traffic updates. Not that he needed to hear them. He knew how long it would take to drive to campus. Turning off the radio, he went to rinse his bowl in the sink. When he turned off the faucet, David noticed how quiet his place was, especially with the new snow muffling sounds from outside. The loneliness of living by himself had started weighing on him lately. It would be good to have some people over to his house.

David brushed the snow off his car, got inside and shivered as his body hit the cold seat. He started the engine, turned on the defroster and accelerated toward the foot-high snow bank at the bottom of his driveway. Blasting through it, he swung the car to the right and headed toward the college. On both sides of the street, homeowners were clearing their sidewalks and driveways. Most used noisy snow blowers, but a few did it the old-fashioned way. With everything covered in white, David thought about warmer weather. Maybe he would take some time off in the summer to go on that adventurous odyssey he'd always dreamed of. Better to do it now while he was young. Summer was still four months away. Too bad he couldn't start sooner.

Pulling into a parking lot, David saw students walking to the first day of class, laden with heavy winter coats and backpacks. Like them, he felt a bit of excitement, but also anxiety. He entered the lecture hall, and as usual he was the first one there. Others drifted in after him, and by the top of the hour, there were two dozen students in the room. It was time for class to begin.

David stood up in front of the room and said, “Good morning students. My name is David Ruben. Welcome to ‘World History 1250.’ ” David spent the first part of the class explaining the schedule, homework, and so on. Then he went into his first-day-of-the-semester pep talk. “We will spend the remainder of today’s class talking about motivation. No matter what the topic, if you don’t have the right attitude, you aren’t going to learn much. Now, who can tell me why we should study history?”

A young woman in the front row said, “To learn about the past.”

“Yes, but why? Think broadly,” David prodded.

A voice in the back answered, “To discover where our knowledge came from.”

“Who said that?”

A young man put up his hand.

“That’s it!” David said. “My fellow teachers might disagree, but I maintain that all other subjects—science, business, the arts—are based on history. Everything they teach was discovered by someone in the past, last week or last century. In fact, everything we know is based on the past. But the question remains, why study it?”

Another student offered, “It’s the key to the future.”

David pointed his way. “Well said. We can’t predict what’s coming, but the more we learn from the past, the better prepared we are for the future.”

One student leaned over to his neighbor and whispered sarcastically, “It’s only history.”

David overheard him. “Do you have a comment?”

The fellow responded, “Isn’t history learning about names and dates? It’s not like we’re going to find the cure for cancer in the writings of Plato.”

“How do you know? The human race has been around thousands of years. We are one family, sharing one planet. We shouldn’t ignore what our ancestors have learned. As for names and dates, we won’t spend much time on those. We want lessons from history that will make a real impact, like stopping wars and eliminating hunger. Think of this class as a treasure hunt for gems in the past that can improve our future.”

Another asked, “Isn’t that depending too much on other people, most of whom are dead?”

David replied, “Virtually all the information in that brain of yours is based on trusting others. If we can’t rely on each other for knowledge, we might as well shut down the whole college.” David glanced at his wrist-watch. “Our time’s run out. Wednesday we’ll start our journey, searching for history that could steer us to a better life.”

While the class dispersed, one of David’s students approached him. She was soft-spoken and petite, barely one hundred pounds.

“Pam, I’m glad to see you’re in this class. What can I do for you?” David asked.

“Mr. Ruben, would you mind if I posed a direct question?”

“I love direct questions. Fire away.”

“You said in class today how history has lessons that can prepare us for the future.”

“It’s one of the reasons I chose this field.”

“You likened it to a treasure hunt and implied we might even find the cure for cancer in the past.”

“Maybe that one was a stretch. What’s your question?”

Pam’s face turned serious. “One of the big unknowns in our future is what happens after we die. In your study of history, what have you learned that would help with this question?”

David looked around the room to see if anyone else was listening. “I would assume that, um . . . it’s a difficult subject.”

Pam waited silently.

“What do you think?” David countered.

“I’m only starting to study history. I was wondering what you’ve found.”

“I see. There’s been a great deal written on that subject, from ancient times until today.”

“I know. More than anyone could read in a lifetime. I was wondering if in your studies you might have sifted out something relevant, to steer us to a better life, like you said.

David was tongue-tied.

“You do think it’s a valid question, don’t you? It’s not like it doesn’t apply to some of us.”

“Oh, I agree. You’ve raised a . . . thoughtful question.” David looked at his watch. “I’m sorry, but I have to run.” David hurried out of the lecture hall and didn’t slow down until he was safely out of Pam’s sight.

Ezra Ruben was taking a Monday morning stroll down the sidewalks of Brooklyn, New York. He went into a grocery store, headed to the bread aisle, and almost ran into someone as he turned a corner. “Michael! What a surprise. It’s been a long time. What are you doing in New York?”

“What a blessing to run into you, Ezra. I’m in town visiting my brother. Tell me what your son David has been doing. Are you a grandfather yet?”

“He’s not even married, and he turns thirty-five next month. I think he’s afraid of making the wrong choice. At least he has a good job teaching history at a college. Maybe you’ve heard of the school; it’s called Vanberth. It’s in a small town in the Midwest. Nice, quiet place. Perfect to raise a family; not that David’s in a hurry for that.”

Michael consoled his friend. “Have patience. He’s still a young man.”

“But what about me?” Ezra protested. “I just turned seventy.”

“Do you get to see him much?”

“Michael, may I be frank with you? He owns a big house in a quiet neighborhood and lives alone, but does he ever invite me to visit?”

“How did that happen?”

Ezra frowned. “We used to be close, but in recent years we drifted apart. Don’t get me wrong; he’s a fine son. I’m proud of his education and what he has made of himself.”

“You’ve taken some hard blows in your life, Ezra, first Samuel and then Hannah. How long has it been since your dear wife left us?”

“Ten years. It seems like yesterday when the four of us were all together in our happy home. Now, there are just two of us left, separated by half a continent.”

After David had fled from Pam, he made his way to the teacher’s lounge. David was average height with black wavy hair. His Mediterranean features divulged his Jewish ancestry. Upon entering the lounge, he saw another professor sipping coffee on the couch. Evelyn was in her late fifties and had been at Vanberth for decades. When David was hired a few years earlier, she took it upon herself to mentor him.

“Evelyn, I don’t see you in here relaxing very often,” David said.

“When do I have the time? How’s the new semester going?” she asked.

“I’ve got a lighter load, so I’m not complaining. I just got embarrassed by a student asking me a question after class.”

“What do you mean?”

“I won’t bore you with the details. During class I made this impassioned oratory on discovering timeless truths from history. Then this frail little student stunned me with a simple question. It was humiliating. At least no one else saw it.”

“You’re too hard on yourself, David. The students love you. You have a natural gift for teaching, and your passion is contagious.”

“Thanks, but I thought you said I was too intense and demanding with my students.”

“Age will mellow you.”

“I’m not getting any younger,” David said. “My dad likes to remind me of that.”

“I’ve never asked about your family. Tell me about them.”

“We grew up in a small town in upstate New York. Now my dad lives in Brooklyn. He moved there after he retired to be near relatives.”

“And your mom?”

David’s smile disappeared. “She passed away ten years ago.”

“I’m sorry. I can tell from her son that she was a fine woman. Do you see your dad much?”

“Not too much. We get along okay and talk on the phone once in a while, but we look at the world differently.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” Evelyn asked.

“I had one brother, but he died.”

“How insensitive of me. I shouldn’t be asking all these questions.”

“No, it’s okay,” David reassured her. “I love talking about my brother Samuel. He took me everywhere with him. We built go-carts, caught frogs at the pond, played ball, and even wrote our own newspaper. He was my hero. I was twelve years old and he was fifteen when he got Leukemia. We shared a bedroom, and he would stay up half the night moaning with pain. A twelve-year-old shouldn’t have to listen to that, especially from his best friend. His dying—it’s not right. When he left, something went out of my life, and I doubt it will ever come back.”

“Don’t be so sure, David. Life has a way of surprising us. You have no idea what’s around the corner.”

The following Saturday, Karl pulled into David’s driveway. He was single and in his mid thirties, like David. He was also David’s best friend.

David opened the door. “Karl, come on in.”

“I’ve probably told you this a dozen times.” Karl said. “You’ve sure got a great location. Big house on the edge of town, with an empty lot on one side. Nothing but trees between you and the nearest farm. Even a panoramic view of the front yard from your living room.”

“I do like my big picture window. I hope some kid doesn’t use it for target practice some day.”

“Don’t worry. You’re at the end of the street. No one comes down here. What’s it going to be today: racquetball, skiing, or just watch a ball game?”

“This time, you decide. Can I get you something to drink?”

“I’m fine.” Karl wandered over to David’s bookshelf. “How many times have I been over here, and I never noticed your cool knick-knacks. Where’d these come from?”

“That trip I took to Europe two years ago.”

“What’s this old book?”

“I got that in Europe too. Check out the title.”

Karl blew the dust off. “Let’s see, the title is: Search for Eternal Life.” He looked up at David with surprise. “That doesn’t seem like you. Yeah, you’re Jewish, but didn’t you tell me your family only went to synagogue a few times a year?”

David grinned. “No one mistook us for fanatics. I’ve got to tell you how I found that book. I was traveling through a small town in northern Italy and stopped for lunch. Next to the café was a mom and pop bookstore, which I couldn’t resist. I don’t think they had one book published within the last fifty years. Of course everything was in Italian, but the owner pointed me to a back corner of the basement with a few English books. The place was ancient. Climbing down the stairs was like stepping into a medieval monastery. I browsed the bookcase and my eyes came across this one. The title wouldn’t let me go. When I was young we made treasure hunts for each other. We’d hide clues and then someone would follow them to the prize. Searching for lost treasure always fascinated me. I had to buy it.”

“I suppose if you were ranking searches, this would have to be near the top. It’s not like searching for a lost sock.”

“You know what Karl, last week, a student asked me a question after class on this same topic.”

“Interesting.” Karl set the book back on the shelf. “So, what’s it about?”

“I haven’t read it yet,” David mumbled.

“What? It’s been collecting dust for two years?”

“I showed it to my dad once. He really liked it. Once in a while I notice it sitting on the shelf. I think about cracking it open, but then I get nervous. I like my life now, and I’m not sure where that book might take me.”

Karl smiled. “It’s only a book. I don’t think it’s dangerous. Although the title has got me wondering. Do you think there’s a paradise somewhere?”

“When I was ten years old, my brother Samuel and I would spend our summer days running from one adventure to another with our friends. At the end of the day, our parents had a warm meal and a cozy bed waiting. Life was literally carefree. That was paradise. It’s gone and it isn’t coming back.”

“You can’t go back to your childhood,” Karl said, “but what if there was another paradise out there? What if there was a thousand-to-one chance that death didn’t have the final word? Wow! What a search that would be.”

“Maybe that’s why I bought the book, but I’m not sure I want to open the cover yet.”

“After you read it someday, I might want to borrow it. Let’s go play racquetball.”

A week later, David woke early on Sunday morning to discover an inch of fresh snow blanketing the town. A perfect morning for a hike. He drove to Cedar Ridge, which bordered the north side of town. A hiking trail led to the top which provided a sweeping view of the whole town. As he ascended, his were the only footprints in the snow.

Arriving at the top, he relished the panorama. Ashbow boasted 75,000 Midwesterners, few enough to feel a bit like a small town, but cosmopolitan enough to keep David satisfied. The town’s four-year liberal arts college brought in a steady stream of foreign students from across the globe. After their college years, a few would settle in Ashbow. As David took in the view, blanketed in pure white, he was excited that winter was nearly over. Soon the snow would melt and be replaced with spring’s glory. Life was good.

He followed a winding trail along the crest of the ridge. The path drew near to the edge of a seventy-foot cliff. A fallen tree blocked the path, so he detoured between the tree and the edge of the cliff. Slipping around the tree, he grabbed a branch for security. The branch was rotted and broke off easily, which startled David. He lost his footing and slid over the edge of the cliff. He grabbed a tree root a few feet below the cliff’s edge, saving himself from falling onto the rocks at the bottom.

Terror overwhelmed him. Quickly scanning above his head, he didn't see a way to climb up. As the cold began numbing his hands, he knew he couldn't hang there for long. *I don't want to die!* He knew he had to keep panic at bay. He screamed for help.

Glancing behind, he saw the town. How bizarre. Here he was teetering on the verge of death while Ashbow watched in silence, calm and ignorant. He wondered how this could happen. One moment he was hiking, and just like that he was facing the end of everything. *Never mind that. Find a way out.* Then he realized that even if someone heard him screaming, he was too far down the cliff to be reached without a rope, which they wouldn't have. Despair pressed down on him, but he fought it off.

Desperately studying the cliff above, he saw his best chance of survival. If he lunged to the right, he could grasp another root closer to the top, and from there he could probably climb up. But it was not a sure thing. He had only one shot. If he jumped and missed the root, he would plummet to the bare rocks, seventy feet below. He kept shouting for help.

His arms were getting weary and his hands colder. Anger and fear took turns assaulting him. No one should ever have to make a choice like this, but he knew that wishing it away would change nothing. The time of decision was near. If he waited much longer he wouldn't have the strength to grasp the other root. He knew that if he stayed where he was he would die, but he wasn't sure he could muster the courage to make the leap. Should he stay put and accept death, not reaching out for the only means of escape? He took one more look at Ashbow behind him. He wasn't ready to lose everything, so he willed himself to take the leap.

Concentrating with everything he had, David took several deep breaths and got himself ready. He swung his body, lunged for the root and grasped it with his right hand. *I've got it! I'm going to live! Keep your head; you're not out of danger yet.* Slowly and methodically, David inched upward, making absolutely sure of each grip. After ten minutes, he was safely over the top. He crawled thirty feet from the cliff and plopped onto the snow, physically and emotionally drained.

Just then, a stocky man with a red beard raced up the trail. He saw David lying face down, and as he caught his breath he asked, "Are you okay? I heard someone screaming for help, so I got up here as fast as I could."

David quickly sat up. "No, I'm not okay. I almost died! What kind of stinking world is this? I'm walking happily along, and just like that I have the worst experience of my life!"

The man stepped back. David pounded his fists on the ground and let out an anguished cry. After looking over at the stunned spectator, he composed himself. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“What happened?”

“I slipped and fell over the cliff. It took me a half hour to climb back up, and I almost didn’t make it.”

“Yikes! Let me take you to the hospital.”

“I’m fine. I’m fine. I just need a little time to get over it. What am I saying? I’ll never get over that nightmare.” David got to his feet and staggered down the trail, keeping far away from the cliff.

The other fellow walked alongside. After a few minutes, he felt the courage to speak. “Maybe you can look at it this way. You just got another chance at life. What are you going to do with it?”

David stopped in his tracks and turned slowly toward him, his face smeared with mud. “Who are you, my guardian angel?”

“No, I drive a semi. I’m just trying to cheer you up.”

They reached the bottom and David said, “I’m sorry I lost it. Thanks for running all the way up there.”

“If you think you’ll be all right, I need to get going.”

David thanked him again and drove home for a shower. He pictured himself telling Karl about this, but then reconsidered. He didn’t want to tell anyone. It was too personal, too traumatic. He did consider the man’s question, though. What was he going to do with his second chance? Today, nothing.

Six days later, on Saturday morning, David drove to the hardware store. A week of warm weather had melted most of the snow. It was late February and spring was approaching. A few days between him and *the event* had helped David recover, at least a little. After buying some paint, David stopped at the city park for a stroll. Flat terrain had never been so appealing. He crossed paths with a staff member from Vanberth College. After a bit of small talk, David said boldly, “Zach, something has been on my mind lately, and I’d like your opinion.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Are you ever afraid of dying?”

Zach’s smile faded. “Hmm. I guess I don’t think about it much. Do you?”

“A little. Why don’t you think about it?”

“It’s not a cheery subject. I’d rather think about living.”

“I don’t mean to sound morose,” David said, “but we all have to face it someday. I’m wondering how other people deal with it.”

“Like I said, it’s not my favorite topic, and we can’t do anything about it anyway.”

David had been gazing into the distance, but when he heard that he snapped to attention and looked Zach right in the eye. “Would you repeat that?”

“It’s not like anyone can do anything about it.”

David suddenly got a glint in his eye. Shaking Zach’s hand, he said “Thank you.” Swinging around, he went to his car and drove straight home.

He rushed through his front door, quickly put his things away and entered the living room. Standing by the bookshelf, he hesitated and stared at the book. He thought, *Should I pick it up? My life may never be the same. What did I say on the cliff? If I stay where I am, I will die.*

David reached out his hand and grabbed the book, the one he and Karl had talked about, the one he had never opened. He sat down on the couch and laid it on his lap. Nervously opening the front cover, he found no table of contents, no copyright date and no other reference information. There was simply a short story entitled “Will to Live.” He began to read.



## Will to Live

Many years ago two nations were at war. A young man felt the call to serve his country. It was not an easy decision to leave his farm, young wife and three small children, but they would be looked after by relatives. When the time came to depart, he tore himself away from his beloved and precious little ones. As his wife watched him disappear over the horizon, she knew that she might never see him again.

The man fought bravely in battle, but one day he was captured. The enemy took him to a prison camp deep within their country. The war stretched on for years. His wife heard nothing from him, and didn’t know if he had been killed in battle. The children were growing up without their father, but she consoled them with the hope that someday he might come home, no matter how long they waited.

Life in the prison was bitter. The daily rations were meager and the labor hard. These were a greater deterrent against escape than the prison fence, for the prisoners were too weak to flee. The young man was losing hope of ever seeing his family again, and he began despairing of life itself.

Over the course of time, he befriended an aged prisoner. As they labored together in the prison factory, the young man shared his longings for his family and former life. One day this elderly gentleman pulled the young man aside. “Listen to me. You know how it is with this camp. They slowly starve and work us to death. They don’t expect us to live until the end of the war. How many of our fellow soldiers, captured with us, have already perished? I’m afraid you are on the verge of giving up.”

The young man protested, “Why not give up? There’s no hope.”

“There is hope. Escape and return to your country. They barely guard the camp because we are too weary to run away.”

“I might be caught and executed. Besides, it’s a long way to the border, and I am frail. I don’t think I can make it.”

“If you stay here, you will most certainly die,” reasoned the old man. “I am lame, so for me escape is impossible, but you have a chance. Don’t give up on life. It doesn’t have to end like this. If not for yourself, then do it for your beloved family.”

Everything within the young man argued against escaping. It required tremendous effort and courage to step into the unknown beyond the fence. At least here he had a bed and a bit of food. Wouldn’t it be easier to let go of life and drift off into the appealing darkness of death? Then he remembered his family, friends and the wonderful experiences life had given him. Would he give up and passively accept death without a fight?

After a few days, he announced to his friend, “I have found the will to live.” The young man thanked his fellow soldier for putting the spark of life back in him. A week later, in the middle of the night, he climbed over the fence and slipped into the forest.

The real battle was only starting—eluding detection and scavenging for food, while trying to head in the right direction. He knew he had to steer northwest where he hoped to cross a lightly guarded border. He traveled at night, navigating by the stars. Progress was painfully slow because of his weakened condition and the lack of food. His determination to live carried him forward, although he thought of quitting with every step. Victory was not guaranteed, but defeat was, if he gave up.

After ten days of travel, he came within sight of the border, the last obstacle. All he needed to do was cross over to his homeland without being recaptured by border guards. As he rested in the bushes during the day, he wondered what his children looked like after all this time, and how his wife would receive him. Did they think he was still alive? Were they still longing for him?

When full darkness returned, he stood on his feet and headed anxiously toward the border.

The End



David threw his hands up when he came to the end of the story. “What?” he shouted. “That’s it? Does he make it home or not?” David shuddered when he thought about the parallels between this story and his episode on the cliff. He was tempted to turn the page and continue reading, but instead he slammed the book shut. First he must decide if he would search. He needed time to think.

David put the book back on the shelf. He packed for an overnight trip, loaded his car, and drove north. Leaving the city limits, he glanced to the right and noticed Cedar Ridge. He drove for an hour to a small town and checked into a motel. The woods and fields in that area were filled with hiking trails, so David laced on his leather boots and drove to a trail head. This time of year, no one would be on the slushy trails to distract him.

*Maybe I’m overreacting, he thought. I don’t have terminal cancer. Although, what’s the difference between me and someone who does? Only a few decades—maybe. Does it make sense to wait until I’m near death to start dealing with it? I don’t think so. Is this a fruitless search? Is there absolutely no chance of escaping death? Millions around the world believe there is life after death. Have I examined the reasons for their beliefs? Of course I haven’t. If there is reason to think there may be life after death, I should at least check it out. Let me review. Like the prisoner in that story, if I do nothing I will certainly die. But if I try, there is a chance. How good of a chance, I don’t know. I hesitate because of apathy and laziness, which are terrible reasons. It seems like I should try.*

David turned and looked back down the trail. He could still see his car a quarter mile away.

*What? I'm only minutes from my car! I expected to be wrestling with this for hours. I must be missing something. Let me go over this again. One: I know for sure I will die, whether in forty days or forty years. Two: A solution might exist. I cannot be sure that it doesn't. Three: Therefore, I should make an effort to search for it, unless I prefer death over life. My screaming on the cliff proved I prefer the latter.*

*This is nuts. The answer is falling right into my lap. If it's so obvious, why didn't I think of this before, and why don't more people come to the same conclusion? This is giving me a brain cramp. Has everyone answered this question but me? I feel like the man who suddenly realizes the ship is sinking. The other passengers don't seem to care, and I can't figure out why. Are they all in on it?*

*Part of me doesn't want to do this. It could be a lot of work. The outcome is unknown. It could turn ugly. People might passionately disagree with me, or make fun of me. It seems safer to stay in ignorance. What am I saying? How can ignorance be safer? I'm starting to see why people choose to ignore this whole question. What am I going to do? I can't go back to the way I was. I can't ignore the possibility, however slim, that immortality might be within my grasp. I'll sleep on it.*

After supper, David sat at a table in his motel room with a notepad. He considered methods he might use in his search, but after ten minutes his pad was still blank. So he wrote down every crazy idea that popped into his head, no matter how absurd. After filling two pages, he began crossing off the ones that were obviously bad ideas. After an hour he was down to four options. His high school teacher once said that a group working together is always smarter than one person. That had always rung true for David.

He crossed three items off the list. He would recruit a team to join him on his quest. He still needed a good format to ensure that his fellow searchers were serious, but he would figure that out later.

Early the next morning, David checked out of the motel and headed back to the muddy trails to turn the question over in his mind one more time.

*Does anything look different from yesterday? No. It still makes a lot of sense. It dwarfs most other pursuits, if not all of them. I still can't figure out why I didn't think of this before. Was my tumble over the cliff a blessing in disguise? And why do so few people seem concerned about this? People search for answers in medicine, business, and technology, but none of those will conquer death. We should be devoting entire universities to the search for eternal life. Everybody must assume they already have the answer, but why don't they talk about it, and how is it everyone forgot to tell me?*

Under a large oak tree, David made a resolution. He would follow the example of the young soldier in the story. He would not passively accept death as his only destiny.

David's eyes fell upon a small, smooth stone on the ground. A picture of Rabbi Schenker came into his mind. He saw himself at Synagogue when he was ten years old. The Rabbi was relating how the Jews in ancient times would set up a physical reminder of their pivotal encounters with God, utilizing a stone or a monument. David grabbed the stone and put it in his pocket.

He hiked back to his car, his mission completed. It was a beautiful, early spring day. The sun was melting the snow, and he caught the smell of thawing soil. What a perfect time to start the search, springtime. His thoughts went back to his youth when he and his friends would set out on epic journeys to discover lost kingdoms in the woods around their town. Those were precious memories, but David grew more and more excited as he pondered this new adventure. Those were make-believe but this was not, and it could be the greatest quest of all. What if he actually found what he was looking for? It could also end in embarrassment, bitterness, or worse. That's what made it glorious. It wasn't a game. It was for real. David started the hour-long ride home.

While David was still a half hour from town, he picked up his phone to recruit his first team member. "Karl, can you meet me at my place in half an hour? I've got an idea. I can't tell you anything now, other than it's big. Great. See you then."

When David arrived home, he put the stone from his pocket on the mantle over his fireplace. When Karl knocked on the door, he was ushered directly to the living room couch. David placed the book in his hands. "Read the first story."

Karl looked up at David. "You've already finished it?"

“Just read. It’s only two pages.”

Karl read the story of the young man in the prison camp. When he tried to turn the page to the next story, David snatched the book from his hands. “Don’t look ahead. Why do you think the story ended that way?”

“Perhaps it means the ending isn’t decided yet. Maybe the author’s real concern isn’t this make-believe character but the reader.”

“Interesting.”

“Okay, what’s this all about?”

David didn’t tell him about the cliff, but he told him about everything else, including his retreat. Then he said, “Here’s what I’m thinking. I put out posters, brochures and newspaper advertisements for discussions, right here in this room. See who shows up. Would you come? I know this is a lot to dump on you at once.”

Karl drifted over to the picture window and for a couple minutes he watched the birds in the front yard pick at the bare patches between the snow. Then he turned to David. “Why not.”

“Really?”

“I’m in. I’ll be there.”

“Fantastic! Do you think we’ll get anyone else?” David asked.

“Yes I do, and this is why. You’re a natural leader, and people like you. Remember how I used to say you should have gone into politics? Have you finished reading the book?”

“I’ve only read as much as you did. I don’t want to read ahead. The team will go through it together. I know that sounds odd, but that’s the way I want to do it. It’s like a treasure map, one step at a time.”

“David, did you notice something unusual about the book?”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no author listed.”

David quickly grabbed the book and looked at the front, back and the page before the first story. He found no author. “I hadn’t noticed. Why do you think the author did that?”

Karl surmised, “Maybe his thinking was that the book is not about him . . . or her.”

David set the book back on the shelf. “So will you help me advertise?”

“I said I’m in, didn’t I? But I am a bit worried. This is the kind of topic that gets some people riled up. They might not be too happy with what we find.”

“All we’re doing is trying to stay alive. No decent person should be offended with that. But you may be right.”

The rest of the day, David and Karl planned logistics. Meetings would start in eight days, and they'd gather at seven p.m., three evenings a week: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. They agreed David's living room was perfect, spacious with lots of windows. David purchased a dozen folding chairs to supplement his living room couch and easy chairs. They stapled posters on telephone poles around town. They paid for an advertisement on the back page of the local newspaper.

## Search for Eternal Life

This is an open invitation to anyone who wants to join us in our quest. Our goal is to answer this question: Is eternal life obtainable, and if so how do we get there? This is a serious venture. We want to work together with those who honestly seek an answer. We also welcome those who believe they have something to contribute to our search. Times, location and contact information are given below.

After the newspaper came out, David got some phone calls. One of them asked, "What group are you connected with?"

"I'm not with any group," answered David. "My friend and I are doing this on our own."

"Then what religion are you?"

"We are not favoring, or excluding, any religion. We're searching for the fountain of youth."

"Come on. Level with me. What's your angle? Is this a school project? Is there a sales pitch?"

"I assure you, sir, we have no hidden agenda. Our purpose is as stated in the advertisement."

"Are you a cult?"

"I guess that depends on your definition of a cult." The man hung up, and David realized he could have worded that differently.

# CHAPTER 2

Monday, March 1

The day of the first meeting, Karl came early to help with cleaning and moral support. When everything was prepared, they sat down, stared at each other, and wondered if it would be just the two of them. The door bell rang at ten minutes to seven. Karl greeted the guest with a nervous smile, but David, being a teacher, was used to welcoming new people.

By ten after seven, six people had come. They seemed to be at ease. One liked the house location, nestled against the woods. Another appreciated the peaceful flames in David's fireplace.

David treated it like the first day of a semester. After welcoming everyone, he reviewed practical matters like schedule and where the bathroom was. With the preliminaries out of the way, David excitedly shared why he had called them together.

"I'm thrilled to see seven people who want to go with me on this search. In a minute you'll each have a chance to tell us why you came. First I will share my one ground rule. We may be at different places in our beliefs about eternal life. Therefore, I'm asking everyone to temporarily lay aside your beliefs and start with a clean slate. I'm not asking you to renounce your beliefs, but only to keep them to yourself for now. If your beliefs are correct, I trust we will gravitate in that direction. I'm starting with a clean slate, and until recently I never gave this topic any thought. Karl, would you go next?"

"Hello, everybody. My name is Karl and I've been friends with David for years. But I didn't come just for his sake. I think this project is worthwhile, and I'm very interested in where it will go. David won't like me saying this, but you should know he is a man of integrity. You haven't hitched your wagon to a fruitcake."

“I can go next. My name is Mary. If I understand you, David, you don’t want to hear what we believe, but instead why we came. For me, it’s simple mathematics. Our short number of years on Earth is nothing compared to eternity. I don’t know for sure about life after death, but it seems there is a chance. Eternity is a long time, which makes the potential payback huge. Thank you all who came tonight, and I hope to see you Wednesday.”

“My name is Paul. David, I think your ground rule is a good idea. We all have different beliefs, but if we start together and search sincerely, we will steer toward the truth. I’m here because this topic is important, and I want to contribute any way I can.”

“Good evening, everybody, my name is Barb and I’ve lived in Ashbow all my life. Why am I here? Nine months ago I went to my mom’s funeral. She was a precious woman. I remember the day she bought me a puppy, and the time she helped me set up a lemonade stand. At the funeral they talked about her being in heaven, and how we’d all see her one day. We never talked about those things at home. We went to church once in a while, but if you ask my brothers and father, they have all kinds of disagreements with the church, and so do I. Can we ignore that at the funeral, and send her off to heaven, just because we miss her? So I’m here to find out where my mom really is. My husband and teenager think I’m off my rocker, but I told them, ‘You don’t have to come.’ ”

“I guess we’re going around the circle. My name is Sandra and I’m excited to be here. Barb, please accept our condolences for the loss of your mother. Like the rest of you, I think this is an important topic. Thank you, David, for opening up your home. My kids are grown and my husband works evenings, so this works out good for me.”

“I’m Elizabeth, but everyone calls me Liz. This is so cool to see the different kinds of people here. Like David, I come with a clean slate. I’m totally open to whatever we find. I like what you said, Mary, about not taking a chance on eternity. I can also relate to what you said, Barb. People lean on the hope of heaven when they feel bad, and then forget about it. I’d be surprised if it really works that way. David, will you be telling us how we’re going to do this?”

David responded, “First, let’s hear from our last guest.”

“No one left but me. My name is Jose. I was taught some beliefs growing up, but I tossed ‘em out when I left home. About a year ago something happened that got my attention. So I’ve been searching already, reading books. When I saw the ad, I figured maybe this will help. I’m very determined and I hope everyone else takes this seriously. I’m not here just for

myself, but for my wife and little ones. They're making a big sacrifice with me being gone three evenings a week, but it's worth it. I don't care what it takes. I want the truth."

David thought, *I like this guy.*

David said, "Thank you for sharing. Someone asked about our format, and I'll be glad to tell you all about it . . . Wednesday. It should be an interesting meeting. I want to keep this first meeting short. Thanks for coming."

When everyone was gone, David plopped into an easy chair, "Well Karl, that went well, don't you think?"

"Very well. I bet you're glad the first meeting is over."

"You said it. Karl, now that I've seen actual people here, I'm worried."

"Why? You're a natural for this."

"There are so many ways this could go wrong. What if some character causes trouble, or what if someone leads us down the wrong path?"

"Do you think that's possible?" Karl said.

"Look how eager we are. Maybe that will trick us into believing what we want to believe. We may need to talk about our attitudes before we start going through the book."

"How do you know the book won't do that?"

David gave a stern look at Karl. "You haven't read ahead have you?"

"No. I can't. You hid it, remember?"

"Oh, right. Say, do you know anything about decorative stones?"

## Wednesday

At the next meeting, David was amazed to see that all six returned. "Let's begin. I told you this meeting would be interesting. I propose a covenant, and I invite you to join. Here are the requirements:"

Commit to attend every meeting, unless you have a very good reason.

Wear a necklace to every meeting. I will supply the necklace.

You can quit the covenant at any time, but you can never rejoin.

The covenant members can vote someone out if they don't keep the rules.

You are released from the covenant once these meetings stop.

David continued, "The benefits of the covenant are voting privileges. As we travel on our journey, there will be decisions about which path to take.

The covenant members will make those choices for the rest of the group by means of a three-fourths majority vote. The purpose of the covenant is to give this search the priority it deserves. You don't have to belong to the covenant to attend and join in the discussion, and there is no stigma on those who don't join. I don't expect most people will join. So far, I'm the only member. The necklace is simply a sign of the covenant, like a wedding ring. I want everyone to think about this until at least Friday. Questions?"

The faces in the room showed various levels of shock and confusion. Paul thought, *who is this guy?* David broke the silence. "There must be questions. You don't have to join to come here and participate. You can quit at any time."

Sandra What would happen if no one joined the covenant?

David We would keep going, but when it came time to choose our direction, I alone would decide.

Barb Can I see the necklace?

David pulled the one he was wearing from under his shirt.

David You only have to wear it during the meeting, but I made a vow to keep mine on all the time until I finish searching. It's something tangible to pull me forward, in case I get discouraged and want to give up.

Paul What would be an acceptable reason for missing a meeting?

David Death. No, wait, we're trying to avoid that. (No one laughed.) I was trying to get the group to lighten up. I suppose that's what everyone is thinking I should do. (A few people laughed.) Back to your question, Paul. It would be the same reasons why you would miss work. In other words, it can't be, "I don't feel like going tonight."

Jose I'm impressed. That doesn't mean I'm ready to sign up yet, but I respect your passion, man.

Paul I'm impressed too. But I hope you understand we may want to come to a few meetings before taking that kind of vow.

David Yes, of course. You took this better than I expected. Let's see how you take the second part. I'm going to read a story from this book.

David opened the book and read the first story entitled "Will to Live", about the soldier who escaped from the prison camp.

David We will use this book to guide our search, like a treasure map. Each meeting we will read a short section to steer our discussion. Questions?

Sandra What's the title of the book?

David Search for Eternal Life.

Sandra That's certainly appropriate. Who wrote it?

David The book doesn't list an author.

Liz That's odd. Where did you get it?

David The basement of a small bookstore in northern Italy.

Jose How much of it have you read?

David Just this first story.

Jose Can I see it?

David No. I have decided that neither I nor anyone else will be allowed to peek ahead because that might bypass important steps and jeopardize our search.

Barb Okay, am I the only one who thinks this is getting a little weird?

No one else said anything.

Barb (Throwing up her hands.) I guess I'm the only one.

Paul Do you know anyone else who has read the book?

David Yes. His name is Ezra Joshua Ruben. My father. When I first brought the book back from Europe two years ago, I stopped to visit him in Brooklyn. He read the whole thing. As I was leaving, he handed it to me and said, "David Ezra Ruben, read this book!" He also told me not to peek ahead.

Barb Maybe he just meant it's a good read.

David It was the way he said it. There have been only two other times in my entire life that he addressed me with all three of my names like that. One was at my bar mitzvah, and the other was when he told me that my mother had passed. Believe me, he meant it.

Paul And you trust him.

David With my life. If you had known him as long as I have, you would too.

Liz If you don't mind my asking, why have you waited two years to start reading it?

David That's a fair question. I haven't been an obedient son. But now I intend to remedy that.

Mary Karl, you know your friend. What do you say about all this?

Karl I say, come Friday, every one of you will be back here. Why? Because you want eternal life, and because you have a growing suspicion that David just might be the guy who can help you find it.

The following day, Sandra talked with her husband over lunch. “I’ve been thinking all morning about this. I’m not sure if I should make the commitment to this group.”

“You mean that covenant you told me about last night?” her husband said. “That’s three nights a week, for who knows how long.”

“It’s not just the covenant. Do I want to keep going at all? It’s busy at work right now. I also need to schedule my ankle operation. And then some new students have contacted me about starting piano lessons. This is not a good time.”

“It would be a big sacrifice for you, but an opportunity like this doesn’t come along very often. Is it worth it? That’s the question you need to answer. Whatever you do, I’ll support you.”

“Thanks, dear. If I keep going, I should jump in with both feet. I’ll decide before tomorrow night’s meeting.”

## Friday

At the next meeting, everyone returned, and they were joined by a young man named Cooper. Jose remarked, “I’ve got to hand it to you, Karl. You were right. We’re all back.”

David started, “Some of you may have noticed that stack of marble stones over there. As we travel along, these stones will serve as visible reminders of each stage we complete. I got the idea from my Hebrew ancestors. We will write the stage on a card, mount it to a stone, and build a pillar right here in the living room. Because we are working with ideas, it helps to have tangible reminders that represent the steps in our search. I’ve already laid a stone for the story we read last time, “Will to Live.” For newcomers, a sheet on the table over there describes the covenant terms. Does anyone want to join?”

“Yes, I would,” Paul said.

“I would also,” Sandra added.

“Me too,” Mary said.

David was stunned.

Sandra asked, “When do we get our necklaces?”

David ran to the back of the house, brought out three necklaces, and handed them to Paul, Sandra, and Mary. “Obviously, I wasn’t expecting anyone to join today. Thank you for the vote of confidence. It means a great

deal to me. Now on to the main part of our evening, the book, followed by our discussion. Karl, would you do the honors of reading the story?"

David handed him the book, and Karl turned the crinkly pages to uncharted territory.

"The title of this story is 'Humility,' " Karl said. "It looks like the book may deal with attitudes first." Karl looked over at David with a little smirk and started to read.



## Humility

There once was a primitive jungle tribe. Their territory was infested with harmful creatures such as poisonous snakes, disease carrying insects, and savage animals. Since they had lived there for generations, the tribe adapted and survived, but their lives were in continual danger. Their culture forbade anyone from leaving their ancestral land.

In spite of this prohibition, one day a small band set out to explore. After traveling for many weeks, they discovered a fertile valley in the mountains. To their delight, this place was free of the deadly creatures common in their homeland. The explorers built houses, planted crops, and prospered. When they were firmly established, they desired to send messengers back to tell their tribe about this place. Three young men were selected to make the long journey.

When the three arrived, they called the tribal elders together from all the villages. They described the new land and urged them to consider relocating because there was room enough for all. As if to underscore the reason for moving, someone had died of a poisonous bite only days before the three men's arrival.

The elders conferred and responded, "It cannot be true that you have found a land such as you describe. The animals in the forest are common throughout the world, a fact known since ancient times."

"We lived in that land many days," said the young men, "and all three of us assure you that it exists just as we have described."

The elders said, "We elders speak from the tribal wisdom that has been passed down to us. You are but youths."

One of the young men said, “When our band first left here, you all said we would meet with disaster, yet here we are.”

“We may have been mistaken about that, but there is no way we are wrong about this.”

“Then send someone back with us to verify our story.”

“Our people have learned to face life’s challenges with courage and cunning. Since the place you describe cannot exist, we see no reason to weary anyone with such a fruitless journey. Others have ventured out as you have, yet they never discovered the place you describe.”

The young men urged them to reconsider, but the elders stated, “We are sure we are right about this.”

As the young men left the meeting, one of the elders chased after them and humbly requested, “If you would be so kind as to wait, my family and I would like to come with you.”



David Let’s hear your comments.

Liz Did you catch what they said? “We are sure we are right about this.” and “There is no way we are wrong.”

Karl That’s why it’s called “Humility.” Their pride kept them and the rest of the tribe from a better life.

Mary They didn’t want to admit that the explorers had found something which they had not.

David Who is this story really about?

Paul Us. Every one of us has been guilty of being unteachable like them, wise in our own eyes.

Cooper Are you saying I can’t ever be sure I’m right?

Paul Not at all, but we arrive at the truth through humility, not pride. Humility starts out with the assumption that I might be wrong, and stays there until the truth is beyond a reasonable doubt. Pride quickly arrives at a conclusion with insufficient evidence, and then never questions itself because it’s enamored with its own cleverness.

Sandra The proud mind is convinced that it is very smart, so it is not open to correction.

- Jose I can see how this relates to what we're doing. We will be examining ideas on which we have strong opinions. If we act like those elders, we could miss what we're searching for.
- David Well said, Jose, but here's the challenge. It's easy to spot pride in those elders. Seeing it in ourselves is next to impossible.
- Sandra You're right, David. Pride tells us we may be wrong about trivial facts like the capital of Argentina, but we could never be wrong about important topics.
- Liz So how do we defeat it, if we can't see it in ourselves?
- Karl Start out assuming that you might be wrong. You're not saying you are wrong, just that you could be.
- Cooper And be willing to endure embarrassment in front of your peers, just like the one elder who choose to go with the three men.
- Barb As I was driving here tonight, I was followed by a flying saucer.
- Mary My initial reaction is, "That's impossible", because I know flying saucers don't exist, and I could never be wrong about that. The new Mary is humble. Tell us more, Barb.
- Barb (Grinning) Maybe it was a Frisbee.
- David Thanks, Barb and Mary. This has been excellent. Let's remember these tribal elders and avoid their arrogant attitude like the plague.
- David took a white card, wrote the word "Humility" on it, and glued it to the front of a marble stone.
- David There is nothing for the covenant members to vote on yet since we aren't choosing between two paths. Agreed?
- The other three concurred. David laid the new stone on top of the "Will to Live" stone.
- David We have laid the first foundation stones in our search. Thank you all for a profitable evening.

The next day, David was doing Saturday morning errands around town. Crossing a parking lot while heading toward a store, he recognized someone. "Joseph. Imagine meeting my own cousin this far from New York."

Joseph turned around. "I've been in Ashbow longer than you, David. I was the one who told you about your teaching job, remember?"

"Yes, you've reminded me of that more than once."

"Did I see a newspaper ad about some meetings at your house?"

“That’s right. You should come over and check it out. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at seven.”

“When did you get religious?”

“I didn’t. We are trying to find eternal life.”

“Not sure how you’re going to find that without religion.”

“You sound like you’ve thought about this. Come on over and help us search.”

Joseph said, “Nice try. That’s not my thing.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t need a reason. I’m not interested; that’s all.”

“Don’t you ever wonder what happens when you die?”

“Not really. Why ruin my life worrying about death?”

“I bet you don’t save for retirement either.”

“Save the psychology for your students. Look, if your meetings are helping you feel better, then I’m happy for you.”

“We aren’t doing it to feel better! We are doing it to find immortality. For the life of me, I can’t understand why you don’t care.”

“Right. It’s been real nice talking to you, cousin.” Joseph walked off.

David stomped to his car and sped away. *What’s wrong with everybody? On the other hand, that was me a few weeks ago. Do I need to drag Joseph up to Cedar Ridge for a hike?*

After he cooled down, David regretted losing his temper, and knew an apology was due the next time he saw Joseph. He had a habit of losing control when he was passionate about something, and this had gotten him in trouble at Vanberth. Then he realized he hadn’t even gone into the store, so he did a U-turn.

## Monday

Twenty minutes before the meeting, David’s doorbell rang. *Someone’s early*, David thought, and he opened the door to an elderly man.

“Is this those life after death meetings?”

“Yes,” David said as he led him to the living room couch. “Did you see one of our posters?”

“Something like that. My name’s Hank. Are you David Ruben?”

David put out his hand. “Yes. Pleased to meet you.”

“David Ruben. Sounds Jewish.”

“Yes, it does sound Jewish. Can I ask why you came?”

“I’m seventy-five years old. I was quite the athlete in my younger days, even at college. Got to travel a lot with the team. Traveled on my job too. Saw the world. Now I’m retired and waiting around to die. Then I saw one of your brochures on the table down at the community center, where the old fogeys hang out playing cards. I read it but I figured you guys got nothing. Why, your brochure even admits you don’t have the answer. But then I realized, what’ve I got that’s better? Life’s been good to me. Why give up now? Suppose my boat sank at sea, and I’m clinging to a tiny raft. After many days, I see a faint light on the horizon, but I’m very weak. Do I give up, or do I paddle toward it? I’m an old man, so this is no hypothetical question.” Hank looked David straight in the eye and pressed his index finger into David’s chest. “I’m paddling! I’m not ready to lie down and die. But you guys had better deliver the goods.”

Soon the rest arrived, along with another newcomer named Anna. David announced, “Let’s get started with the story.”

Barb interrupted. “Before we do that, I want to give the covenant a try. I was planning on coming every time anyway, and I can use some more jewelry. I like the book idea. It’s kind of exciting not knowing what’s behind the next page. It keeps me coming back.”

“I’m sorry for not asking if anyone wanted to join. Welcome to the team.” David handed Barb a necklace, then said, “Sandra, would you read the story?”



## Sacrifice

A time of economic depression and unemployment plagued the land, and in one small town it was especially severe. One day, a company revealed that they would open a new chemical plant in town, and they announced job interviews. Eager townspeople waited in line for hours, and in the morning the interviews began.

Near the back of the line stood Carlos and Boris. They passed the time sharing their backgrounds with each other. They had much in common. Both had been out of work for months, and both had large families to support. Neither wanted to miss this rare chance for steady employment. When Carlos finally came to his interview, he was delighted to hear that there were

still openings available. The manager informed him, “The only positions we have left are in hazardous waste disposal. Don’t be alarmed. It’s not as risky as it sounds, but you spend most of the day wearing a bulky, full-body chemical protection suit. Can you do that?”

“Sure I can,” Carlos said.

“One more thing,” added the manager. “If you’re a smoker, you would have to give it up, not just at work but all the time. It interferes with the chemical suit’s function. I can’t explain the technical reasons. All I know is, we can’t take smokers.”

“That would be really tough. Don’t you have any other jobs left?”

“Sorry, that’s it. There are people waiting.”

“I need to think a minute. Can I wait outside the door and tell you after the next interview?”

“Sure,” said the manager.

Carlos walked out and Boris was next. He was offered the same job. “I don’t smoke, but I’m not sure I could cope with being in that suit all day.”

“Lots of people do it,” the manager assured him. “You get used to it.”

“It doesn’t seem like a very pleasant way to spend five days a week.”

“Do you want the job or not?”

While Boris hesitated, Carlos came through the door and said, “I’ll take it, even if I have to give up smoking.”

When Boris heard that, he said, “I’ll take the job too.”



David That’s the story. What’s the point?

Barb Sometimes to get what we need, we have to make sacrifices.

Sandra The story showed two types of sacrifices: Letting go of what we love, and doing something we don’t like.

Jose Giving up smoking can be next to impossible for some people.

Liz I was thinking the same thing about working all day in a chemical protection suit. I’m not sure I could do it.

Cooper No one is saying sacrifices are easy. What do you want more, the job or the cigarette? You’ll choose what’s more important.

David We don’t want to get close to the prize, only to miss out because we aren’t willing to make the sacrifice.

Karl But who says we will have to make sacrifices? Maybe that won't be needed.

Paul Possibly, but Carlos and Boris didn't expect it and they almost stumbled.

David My gut feeling is that it will be needed. I haven't noticed eternal life being offered for free in cereal boxes. Can anyone suggest some things we might have to sacrifice?

Mary Our vices, our comforts.

Jose Our religion.

Sandra You may have to befriend someone you can't stand.

Liz This is starting to sound like some weird cult. I came here to find life, not live in a desert cave.

Jose If that is what's needed, would you be willing to do it?

Liz How can I answer that until I know what must be sacrificed?

David We don't know. But we're preparing our attitude for whatever may come.

Paul If you have a lot of things you're unwilling to change, then you may be wasting your time coming here.

Mary Did you notice how Carlos' willingness to sacrifice encouraged Boris to do the same? When one of you makes a difficult choice, it motivates me.

Barb And if someone drops out, it could encourage others to give up.

Anna What about going against our conscience? Is anyone willing to murder to get eternal life?

Barb I was thinking the same thing. Where do we draw the line?

Karl Can I suggest we deal with that once it comes up, because we might never have to make that choice.

Paul I agree with Karl, but there's another side to this. We must be careful we don't exclude ourselves from eternal life because of a misguided conscience. Let's say I'm a vegetarian, but I must eat meat to gain immortality. Which one wins, eternal life or carrots?

David What are you suggesting?

Paul Murder we can all agree on, but I'm suggesting we have some humility toward our convictions on less obvious issues. To put it bluntly, many of us are wrong on some of our moral positions, and I can easily prove it.

Cooper I'd like to see that.

Paul Raise your hand if you think the death penalty is morally wrong.  
(Half raised their hands.)

Paul There you go. Half of you are wrong.

Barb Yeah, the half that didn't raise their hands.

Mary We learned last meeting to consider that maybe I'm the one who's wrong.

Jose You go, Mary!

Anna Too much commitment can lead to fanaticism.

Cooper You mean it could make someone a suicide bomber.

Anna Some have committed atrocities in the name of their religion.

Sandra A strong commitment is considered a good thing if the cause is right, like in marriage. I plan on being fully dedicated to this search and also being a decent person.

Jose If someone perverted his dedication into violence, that's his problem. Why should it restrict me? I want to find eternal life. I'm fully committed to that cause and I'm not going to turn to violence. Do you think I can do that?

Anna I think you can, Jose. You've given me some things to think about.

Karl And this was David's reason for the covenant, to encourage commitment and sacrifice.

David Excellent discussion. We got onto related topics like conscience and abuse of sacrifice, but I would like to bring us back to the main point of the story. Here's a suggestion: when you get home, write down the sacrifices you would have a hard time making. Then make up your mind that you will sacrifice them if needed. Any last comments?

Hank If you want to live, don't plan on being lazy.

David put the word "Sacrifice" on a stone and laid it on top of the other two. The stones were made of a beautiful, reddish marble. They were square, one foot long, one foot wide, and two inches high. The tops and bottoms were polished, but the four sides were slightly rough. The card with the story title was taped on one of the rough sides facing the group.

Wednesday

Each meeting, David brought out the book and handed it to someone to read. Immediately after they were done reading, he would take the book and put it in a safe hiding place in his house. Then they would discuss it.



## Assumptions

A widow named Tua lived in a poor, undeveloped country. Working from dawn to dusk, she barely supported her two young children. Life was hard. Some of her relatives had emigrated to the United States, and for some time they had been pleading with her to do the same. She was more than willing, but the embassy observed a strict quota and the waiting list was long.

Then one day news spread across the country of an extraordinary one-time program. The United States would accept additional applicants under special considerations, and with no quota. Interested parties were to contact the embassy for more information, and then on a certain day, three months hence, selected parties could begin emigrating. Tua was elated and made plans to travel to the capital in three months. When a friend came to visit the next day, Tua excitedly told her that she and her children would soon be moving to America.

“Do you know what this special program is about?” asked her friend.

“My relatives told me how compassionate the Americans are. Certainly this program must be for hardship cases like my own. When they see my little ones and my poverty, and hear about my cousins already living in the United States, I can’t see how they will refuse me.”

With growing expectation, Tua wrote her cousins to prepare for her coming. One of them quickly wrote back and urged her to visit the embassy and verify the program’s conditions. Tua thought, *I don’t need to bother with that. I know how these things work.* Besides, she had overheard other villagers talking about the program and assumed that they knew all about it.

When the big day was at hand, Tua took a train to the capital city with her children. She purposely put on an old, worn out dress to emphasize her poverty. At the time of the interview, an official asked her about herself. With her gaunt looking children at her side, Tua described her woeful state

in colorful detail. Then she proudly named her relatives in the United States, where they lived, and their occupations.

“Do you understand what we are looking for under this special program?” asked the man.

“Yes, I believe so.”

The man explained how it worked. “The U.S. government needs people who speak your language to work in a special program in America. No knowledge of English is required to begin with, but you must have gone through the one-week training program. We have been conducting them throughout the country over the past couple months. Did you attend the training?”

Tua started to tremble. “I didn’t know about it. Can I still do it?”

“I am sorry, but the training is all finished. It is a shame because I’m sure you would have completed it and been accepted without any trouble. If you would have contacted the embassy or your local government authorities, they would have gladly told you about it.”

Tua began to shudder and weep. “Please, sir, can’t you make an allowance for me?”

“I would if I could, but it is not in my power to do so. We have procedures and deadlines set by those in higher authority.”

Tua ran from the office sobbing uncontrollably, her two children following behind her.



Sandra Sniff. I’m sorry for crying, but I feel so bad for that woman.

David You’re not the only one. I even saw a tear on Paul’s face.

Mary Have you noticed in every story how their decisions affect not only themselves but their families? It raises the stakes, doesn’t it?

David What’s a good definition for assumptions?

Anna Not knowing what you don’t know.

Cooper Tua had some information, but she filled in too many blanks by guesswork. It’s like the guy who finds an arrowhead in a field and thinks he can reconstruct the entire battle just from his intuition.

Barb Intuition works. It has for me.

Cooper It can also trick us. It works a few times and then we trust it too much.

- David Does this relate to our search?
- Paul Absolutely. I did tear up, but it wasn't for that woman. It was for everyone heading into eternity with her kind of presumption. They are joyfully making plans for heaven, but I fear they will face a much greater disappointment than she did. In my opinion, there is no area with more presumption than that of God and eternity.
- Liz How do you know so many people are presuming about God?
- Paul I've talked to them. They imagine what God is like and don't check out their assumptions any more than Tua did.
- Karl Don't you think God put in our gut a sense of what he is like?
- Paul He could have, but how would you know if he did? If you talk to ten people, you will get seven different descriptions of God. What does that tell you about your gut?
- Liz I disagree. I think God has put the knowledge of him in our hearts.
- Jose That's an assumption, unless you can prove it.
- Hank How many of you have been to heaven and talked directly with God? (The room was silent.) I thought as much. So no more nonsense about God being this way or that, just because you think so. If you've met him, or know someone who has, fine. Otherwise, don't confuse us with your hallucinations.
- Barb Before we get too far on all this talk about God, keep in mind that some of us aren't too sure whether he, or she, exists.
- David Right, Barb, and I'm one of them. As for the story, let me summarize. No assumptions.
- Jose Let's do our homework, so we don't end up like Tua.
- Anna I once heard of a religion that claims only women go to heaven.
- Karl That can't be. (Everyone looked at Karl.) Oops. Did I say that? Um, what I really meant is, lets go ask at the embassy.
- David Good one, Anna.
- David made a stone with the word "Assumptions" and laid it on the others.

Everyone left but Karl. "This attitude scrubbing is good stuff, isn't it David?"

"It's very good, but I'm worried."

"About what?"

"When it comes time to put these concepts into practice, I'm afraid some of us will stumble. It could even be me . . . or you."

"Why would you think that?"

David sighed. “I wasn’t born yesterday. You know what people are like. I wonder if everyone who was here tonight will be around at the end when the dust settles.”

The next day Liz sat on the couch in her apartment opening mail. “Oh no!”

Her roommate called from the kitchen, “What is it?”

“My photography club starts meeting again next week, and I just got the new schedule.”

“You loved that club last year. What’s the problem?”

“They meet Monday and Friday nights,” Liz said, “the same time as my new group.”

“You mean that church group?”

“It is not a church group. Why do I have to make this kind of choice?”

“You could still go to that group on Wednesdays.”

Liz flung her mail on the coffee table. “I’d be missing two-thirds of the meetings. This guy who runs it is intense. I’ve been looking forward to the photo club all winter. Life isn’t fair.”

Her roommate stepped into the living room. “Let’s see, spend two nights a week enjoying your favorite hobby with friends, or spend them debating boring philosophical topics with people you don’t know. Seems like a pretty easy choice to me.”

“I’m going for a walk.” A half hour later Liz returned and informed her roommate, “The choice isn’t easy, but when I think about it, the right one is obvious.”

# CHAPTER 3

Friday

More newcomers arrived, two men in their early thirties, Owen and Elliot. Liz and Cooper volunteered to join the covenant. So far everyone who joined had been faithful to it.

Mary said, “Before we start the story, I have something to share with the group.”

“You’ve got the floor,” David said.

Mary stared at her shoes. “I don’t know how to start. I’m sorry I haven’t talked about this earlier, but I needed to know I could trust you. I’ll just have to say it. Two months ago I was diagnosed with cancer. I’m getting treatment, but it’s still advancing. It doesn’t look good. Right now I’ve got a thirty percent chance to live. I may have only a few months left. Now you know the real reason I’m here. It is for me quite literally a matter of life and death. I was so glad when David announced the covenant, because it showed me this would be taken seriously. I’m sorry for the extra pressure on the group, but believe me, it wasn’t my choice. Please treat me the same as everyone else. I didn’t come here to get sympathy. I came to find the truth.”

Sandra gave Mary a tearful hug.



## Finding Truth

A huge explosion rocked an underground mine. Dozens of miners were trapped a half mile underground. After the initial chaos, the foreman gathered the entombed workers in one area. “Men, I must level with you.

This mine has miles of tunnels spread over a broad area. Those above ground have no idea which parts caved in or where we are. By the time they find us, our air or water may run out. If we are to get out alive, we must find a way of escape by ourselves, if it exists.”

At once, every man set out to discover the existence of an escape tunnel, each employing his own scheme. The foreman moved from man to man, to see what progress they were making.

The first man he encountered sat with legs folded and eyes closed. “What are you doing?” said the foreman.

“I am meditating so that the location of the escape tunnel will impress itself upon my consciousness.”

The foreman found another man heading up a known dead-end tunnel. “Why do you think that’s the way out? It goes nowhere.”

“I think this is the way out because I believe it, and I have always believed it.”

Another man was sitting down doing nothing. “Why aren’t you searching?” asked the foreman.

“Don’t you know how our senses can fool us? Even if I saw something, how would I know it was real?”

The foreman found others studying a map and thought, *this looks promising*. But as he drew within earshot, he heard this comment. “You claim the alignment of these two tunnels is symbolic of their harmony with each other, but you cannot possibly understand this map without taking into account the full cultural and historical environment in which it was created.”

Moving on, he found an idle man. “How can you sit there when we are trapped in a cave-in?”

“The fact that this mine has caved in may be true for you, but it isn’t true for me.”

“And what about you?” the foreman said to the man next to him. “Why are you taking a nap?”

“The existence of an escape tunnel cannot be known.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I believe it to be unknowable.”

Farther along he found several miners in a lively debate about the reality of an escape tunnel. They were discussing the latest theories concerning how truth is known and the contributions of reason versus experience. Much of their time was consumed with defining the exact meaning of various philosophical terms.

Next the foreman saw several miners sitting at the feet of a miner who was giving a wordy oratory. The foreman asked, “What’s this about?”

One of the disciples said, “We’re soaking in wisdom from The Shepherd. His heavenly messages last for hours, and then he will take an offering. He alone can save us.”

The exasperated foreman moved on to discover a group of men playing cards. “What are your stories?”

The first said, “I never discuss the subject of how to be saved.”

The second replied, “Fate has already decided our lot. If we are predestined to be rescued, it will happen.”

The third said, “Don’t you know that our being imprisoned is only an illusion? The moment you awaken to realize this, you will be free.”

The fourth stated, “Since I can’t see an escape tunnel, it doesn’t exist. I don’t believe in anything I can’t see.”

The foreman was about to pull out his hair when his assistant showed up and asked what was wrong. When the foreman told him, the assistant became angry. “Your exclusive and narrow minded view is hateful and arrogant since you imply that these fine men are lost, wandering down dead ends. Many tunnels lead to safety.”

Just then they spotted lights coming down a tunnel. A rescue party approached, led by one of the miners who had been trapped with the others. The foreman ran to embrace the man and asked what happened.

The miner said, “The first thing I did was get extra flashlights from the emergency box. Based on the direction of the explosion, I reasoned that the best chance of passage to the top would be in section nine. I hurried over there and quickly checked as many tunnels as I could. By shouting down each passage and observing the dust for air currents, I was able to quickly rule most of them out. I ran down a few tunnels until I found one that led to the main shaft. I was expecting to climb up the ladder, but when I got there, a rescue team was already descending. So I retraced my steps and led them back to here.”



Liz      At least this story has a happy ending.

Anna     It was an amusing story, but I’m not sure what it has to do with us.  
No one acts so silly.

Paul You are right. People don't act like that in any field of human endeavor, with one notable exception.

David Let me guess. Spiritual truths?

Paul Exactly.

Karl What do you mean by spiritual?

Paul I would define spiritual as the non-physical world: God, religious truths, the creation and end of the world, angels, demons, our soul, morality, and immortality. Everything outside of nature.

Anna Paul, are you saying people actually approach spiritual topics with the same nonsense as those miners?

Cooper He's right. As I listened to the story, I thought it sounded like a lot of religious positions I've heard.

Sandra I agree. The story used exaggeration, but in real life people will phrase it to sound reasonable.

Owen Some approach spiritual topics with common sense.

Sandra You're right. No one is saying everybody does this.

David The title of the story is "Finding Truth." What do you think the point is?

Elliot The point is we will discover spiritual truths the same way we discover every other truth.

Karl If spiritual things are outside of nature, how can we learn about them the same way?

Jose We have to look for places where the spiritual world intersects the natural world.

Barb That makes sense, but I still don't get the purpose of this story.

Paul Mankind is prone to fall into the miner's bizarre thinking. It's a warning. And note what the foreman's assistant said, because I suspect some of you will run into that if you continue our search.

Liz Now I'm starting to see. When it comes to God and so on, people invent new means for discovering truth, but why? There is only one method for learning truth, the same way we learned everything else we know.

David That's a good summary, Liz. Does anyone in the covenant disagree with that?

No one did, so David made up another stone with the words "Finding Truth."

Mary The rescue team met the wise miner part way. What was the story trying to tell us with that?

Hank Someone out there is searching for us.

A couple of them peered at the ceiling with a quizzical look.

After people filtered out, Karl hung around. “I figured you’d want to talk about Mary and her cancer.”

David kicked a folding chair and it collapsed on the floor. “I didn’t sign up for this. What am I, a miracle worker?”

“It puts a whole different tone on this.”

“It’s getting out of hand. I don’t want this kind of pressure.”

“This isn’t just on your shoulders, David. We are searching as a team, and you’re not responsible for Mary.”

“You’re right.”

Karl moved toward the door. “There is a silver lining in this.”

“A blessing in disguise? I’ve had enough of those for one year.”

“This gives us more motivation to get the right answer.”

On the weekend, Jose was up late poring over a fresh stack of books he had just brought home. His wife came up behind him. “Honey, can I talk to you?” Jose set down his book and swung around. “I’m afraid you’re wearing yourself out. You work full time and go to that guy’s house three nights a week. All your free time is consumed with reading these books.”

“I won’t be doing this forever. This is really important to me right now.”

“We hardly see you anymore. The kids miss you.”

Jose gave his wife a hug. “I know this has been hard on them, and you. Be patient. This is not just for me; it’s for the good of the family.”

“I already know what I believe.”

“But I don’t,” Jose said. “If I’m going to be a good husband and father, shouldn’t I find out what life is all about? Shouldn’t I know where we’re headed? I’ve got to get these questions answered. I’ve put it off too long. I need your support during this journey.”

She squeezed his hand. “You’re a good man, Jose, and I love you.”

## Monday

A middle-aged man named Geoff came for the first time. Before they started, Elliot asked, “You’re using this relic of a book like a treasure map, and no one has looked ahead in it, including David.”

“That’s right,” answered David.

“Forgive me for being blunt, but doesn’t that strike anyone as a bit odd?”

“It is very odd,” Mary said. “But we like the book, and I think you will too. It keeps us coming back to see where it’s going to take us next.”



## Deception

A band of pioneers left home to settle in a new land. They traveled for months to a sparsely populated territory. This region had unique soil and the only crop that would grow was a particular kind of local wheat. The pioneers didn’t know this. Some were given wrong information on what to grow by well-meaning friends in the land they came from. Others tested the soil, but misinterpreted the results since they lacked the necessary expertise. Still others went with the same crops they had used back in their homeland. The natives resented these newcomers, so they deliberately deceived some into planting the wrong crop. A few did plant the local wheat, but most of the pioneers planted other crops, which were doomed to fail at harvest time.

A local official, who had lived in the area for years, was away on business when the pioneers arrived and planted their fields. Upon his return, he learned what they had done, so he called the pioneers together and explained their dilemma. “You have been deceived by your friends back home, by your own tests and by local natives who meant you harm. However, it is still early enough in the year so that if you plow up your fields and replant, you will reap a harvest.”

When he finished, a few of the pioneers got up from their seats, mocked him, and walked out. One pioneer stood up to say, “Why would our friends back home lie to us, and why would the local natives do the same? They appear to be friendly and decent folks.”

Another pioneer said, “We trusted in God and he brought us through months of difficulty on our journey here. He would not allow us to be deceived in this way.”

Finally, a third pioneer addressed the official. “These are all experienced farmers, and you disrespect them by telling them they are mistaken. Each one has chosen the crop he preferred, but who are you to tell them what they can and cannot do? Our community is welcoming, not condemning. Kindness is our motto, and we wish each farmer a bountiful harvest.”

The meeting disbanded and only a few pioneers replanted. Later that year, in October, the soil was true to its nature, in spite of the pioneers' expectations.



- Jose Those pioneers wouldn't accept the possibility that they might be deceived.
- Barb I suppose someone is going to say that this describes our spiritual beliefs and everyone is deceived. I'm not buying it.
- Elliot Neither am I.
- Cooper Don't you see? That was the pioneers' attitude. To them, it was unthinkable that they were all deceived. They even appealed to God and the goodness of their fellow man in their defense.
- Elliot But this is just a story. It doesn't mean it's true of Ashbow.
- Paul At your workplace, ask people what they believe. You would find that one is an atheist and another a theist. One believes he's going to heaven, and another believes in reincarnation. One regards only his religion as correct, while another believes they all are. By the laws of logic, some of them have to be deceived. Yet most are as unconcerned as the pioneers were for their crops.
- Sandra The philosophy of so many is, you've got your belief and I got mine, but we'll all be okay.
- Anna It seems harsh to say so many are in error.
- Owen That's why the story warns us. You are in denial because you think it couldn't be true.
- David Paul and the others are making the argument that some people are deceived about spiritual concepts. Barb, Elliot or Anna, do you have evidence to the contrary?
- Barb I didn't see Paul's evidence.
- Anna No, we don't have evidence to the contrary.
- Geoff What's the point of this story?
- Karl We shouldn't deny the possibility of deception, especially in ourselves. None of us has a special immunity to it.
- David Well said. Deception can be avoided. We already know how to do that. The moral of the story is that we are most susceptible to deception when we deny its possibility. That's true of any danger.

Mary This story is very similar to the ones on humility and assumptions.

Liz I thought so too. They hit the same theme from different angles.

David What theme is that?

Liz Believing that I cannot be wrong. This dangerous attitude comes from pride, or from assumptions, or from denying the possibility of my own deception.

David And how can we fight this attitude?

Mary Love the truth. Love it like your life depends on it.

Hank In spite of all that's been said, I know human nature. I was a salesman. Some of you will drive home tonight thinking others might be wrong, but not me. If that's the case, then you're wasting your time coming here. I'm seventy-five years old and I'm not too proud to say that I may have been wrong about the afterlife, wrong my whole life. I'm here to find out.

David placed the word "Deception" on a stone and laid it on the pillar.

## Wednesday

"I would like to join the covenant," Anna said.

"So would I," Jose said.

As David handed a necklace to Anna, he thought, *She's kind of cute. I don't want any distractions. I hope she doesn't sit by me.*



## Trust

In the days when much of North America still belonged to the Indians, two voyageurs traveled through the northern wilderness, trading with the natives. After a profitable summer, they started the long trek back to civilization, before the onset of winter. Because of a minor injury to one of the voyageurs, they fell behind in their schedule. In mid-autumn they camped at a small Indian village. The days were growing colder, and they needed to know the quickest way home, but the territory ahead was unfamiliar.

One of the men, Pierre, knew a bit of the native language and was able to obtain directions from the Indians. He ran to tell his friend. "Rene, we are in luck. The Indians know the route back and explained it to me."

"I'm not going by what they said. How do we know they ever traveled there?"

"They told me they have."

"Sure, they are going to say that," scoffed Rene. "They'll tell you whatever you want to hear, just to get a better trade."

"I wasn't trading with them. I see no reason to doubt what they said. We've been with them a few weeks now, and they have already helped us more than once."

"You barely know their language. The directions probably got scrambled in the translation."

"Rene, you have known me for years. Don't you think I can tell if I'm not getting clear directions? I have as much reason to get the right information as you."

"Listen, Pierre. If we are led astray, we'll be trapped in the wilderness in the bitter cold of winter and freeze to death. I will not put my life into someone else's hands."

"What about that fellow we met last month? What he told us matched the Indians' directions."

"That old Trapper? He didn't strike me as too bright."

"You know we can't stay here," said Pierre. "The Indians are moving on next week, and we can't go with them. Our food runs out in less than two months. Sometimes people have vital information which we don't have access to, and we must choose to trust them."

The next day, Rene came to Pierre and said, "There's no reason to think that you, the Indians, or the Trapper means us harm. Let's be on our way. I'm sorry I delayed us." By late November, Rene and Pierre were safely home.



Jose I'm Rene. I don't like to depend on people.

Mary I think I'm more like Pierre.

David Why is this story in the book?

Owen It's good to trust people.

Karl I think it's more than that.

Liz Sometimes you have no choice but to trust people.

Jose Do we have to trust in people to find eternal life?

Liz How are you going to find it on your own, under a microscope?

Jose We don't know how we will find it.

David Look at that stone over there. What did it teach us? We will find eternal life like we found all other truths. How have we learned almost everything we know? Remember, I'm a history teacher.

Sandra From trusting others.

Elliot Are you sure?

Anna She's right. Think it through. Almost everything we know was told us by parents, teachers, friends, books. We took their word for it.

Geoff Even scientific facts come from research done by others. We can't function in this world without trusting people.

Cooper So, should I be gullible? The story last time had the natives deceiving the pioneers.

Paul Sure, people sometimes mislead us, but with time it's not that hard to tell when they are. Use the same common sense you use for any important decision. No special rules for handling spiritual truths.

Elliot But why are we sure we have to trust others to find eternal life? I'm not comfortable with that.

David We aren't sure, but it is very likely. What we seek won't be discovered by simply sitting in a chair and thinking, because nothing else was discovered that way.

Jose I see what you're saying, but that could be a hard choice.

Mary Trusting, with careful discernment, works. It worked for Rene and Pierre, and it works for us every day.

Barb And Mary is trusting us to help her find an answer.

Hank Someday you'll lie down for the last time, and you'd better have someone you trust on the other side of the grave to pick you back up, 'cause you won't be picking yourself up—you're dead.

Karl I never thought of it that way. That was profound, Hank.

David made a stone labeled "Trust."

While Paul and Sandra walked to their cars, she said, "We're making good progress. People are at different places, but everybody is moving in a good direction, don't you think?"

Paul said, "It's going better than I expected, but you never know what's around the bend. Some may reach the finish line, but others may veer off. There are many side roads."

Friday



## Searching

Two women were working late one evening, deep inside an enormous office building. Suddenly, they heard an explosion and flames began to spread rapidly in every direction. The women were from out of town and unfamiliar with the building. The place was old and had no fire escape signs. No one else was in the building, and the smell of smoke grew stronger.

Maria said to her coworker, Tessa, "We need to find our way out of here, before the fire reaches us."

Tessa replied, "That won't be easy. Did you notice when we came in earlier how the hallways snaked all over the place?"

"Yes I did, and the door to the lobby looked just like the rest of the doors. We'd better start searching for an exit before we run out of time, but let's stick together."

They immediately left the office and began to open doors to peek behind them. Tessa said, "Maybe there are a lot of exits, and we will soon be outside."

"We don't know if that's true, so the safest course is to assume it is not."

"Okay, but I don't know how much to search inside each room."

Maria advised, "This place is so large that we can't spend much time looking behind each door, or we will never get out. Scan the room quickly, and once you are fairly sure it goes nowhere, move on."

Tessa noticed that Maria delayed inside a room, so she followed her in there. Maria, who loved maps, had turned aside to gaze at a large, antique map of the city, mounted on a wall of the room. Tessa scolded her. "We don't have time for that. It won't show us the way out."

"You're right. What am I doing?"

As they continued their search, Tessa passed an old-fashioned spiral staircase that ascended several floors to the attic. *Doesn't that look fascinating. I wonder where it goes.* She felt an urge to explore, but quickly shook it off. *I will never know, because in a short time this building will be ashes.*

Soon afterward, Maria shouted with delight, "I found it! I found it!" Tessa followed quickly behind her as they both ran into the safety of the street.



- Karl I think the book may be done whipping our attitudes into shape, and is getting us ready to start searching.
- Mary Yay!
- David What do the different parts of the story represent?
- Liz The fire is death, outside is eternal life, the women are us, and the building represents the world with its host of ideas, religions, and philosophies.
- Jose I liked what Maria said. We don't know if every door leads out, but it's safest to assume the worst.
- Barb But what if there are a lot of exits?
- Owen Then we will be on the street quickly, and no harm will be done.
- David What do you think the main point of the story was?
- Owen We have limited time, so use it wisely.
- Anna That's interesting because a few days ago I was thinking about the hundreds of religions, ideologies, and gurus. I got depressed because I couldn't study them all in depth in a dozen lifetimes.
- Geoff Don't study them all in depth. Look at them just enough to know if you should dive in deeper, or is this a staircase going to the attic.
- Elliot Come on, Geoff. Those were rooms you could size up in a glance. You can't do that quickly with an entire religion or philosophy.
- Cooper If it doesn't promise eternal life, I'm moving on. That might take only ten minutes.
- Paul This story warns us that we can't afford to get bogged down in the details of every possible path. There simply isn't enough time. But some people do that very thing, not caring that it doesn't lead to life. They enjoy studying everything in the room, while the flames engulf them.

- Hank Don't worry about me doing that. All I want is to get out.
- Jose You tell 'em, Hank.
- Sandra How about that part where Maria got preoccupied by the map? This world has a lot of mesmerizing distractions.
- Anna Like the one hundred places you should visit before you die. Can you imagine Maria telling Tessa, "Let's explore one hundred rooms before we're burned to a crisp?"
- David (Putting his hands on his head.) But that's many people's philosophy of life. It used to be mine, and it's still my cousin's. How can that be?
- Paul It's not the philosophy of this group. We're looking for the door.
- Mary Religion A says everyone goes to heaven. Religion B says only some do. Which one should you study first?
- Barb I'll take door A.
- Elliot A is appealing, but you study B first.
- Liz He's right. If A is true, you'll be okay no matter what you do. If it isn't, then you don't want to waste time on it. Either way, it is safe to ignore. But, you need to find out whether B is true.
- David added a stone named "Searching" to the pillar.

"Before you go," interrupted David, "I have an idea. We've had comments about what the average person believes. I've avoided this subject all my life, so I don't know. My idea is to go door-to-door in groups of two or three and ask people what they believe about eternal life. Maybe we'll learn something. Sunday afternoon seems like a good time to do it. Think about whether you'd like to join me."

# CHAPTER 4

Monday

A young man named Tyler attended for the first time. So far, no one had dropped out.



## Futile Remedies

A young man named Hans had in his possession a treasured family heirloom. It was a Swiss pocket watch built by his great-great grandfather, which had passed into his hands at the recent parting of his father. One day he noticed that it stopped working and decided to get it repaired. But whom should he entrust with such a treasure? Wandering down merchants' lane, Hans saw a sign over a store boasting that they fixed all kinds of gadgets. He left the watch in their care.

A week later he returned, but the clerk said they had not repaired it. The same thing happened after one more week. When the watch had been there a month, still broken, Hans asked to speak with the owner. This man told Hans that the store never claimed it could repair something as complicated as his watch. Dejected, the lad took his watch and set out for home.

Hans told his friend about his dilemma. The friend answered, "I know someone who claims he can repair watches."

Hans gladly took the watch to this man. When he stopped by a week later, the man had pieces of the watch strewn across his work bench, but informed him that he wasn't done yet. After another week, the situation had not changed. Hans asked him, "Have you ever repaired a watch before?"

“No, but it can’t be that hard.”

Hans nervously asked him if he could put it back together as he had found it.

“I think so, if that is what you want. Come back tomorrow.” The next day he retrieved his still broken watch.

A few days later, Hans called on his uncle for a social visit. In the course of their conversation, the uncle asked about the watch. Hans told him the story of his failed attempts to get it repaired.

“What have you learned from this?” asked his uncle.

“Two valuable lessons. First, why expect someone to do what they never promised they could do? Second, why expect someone can perform a difficult task if they have never done it before?”

“You have learned well, my young nephew. There is in the next city a skilled master watchmaker. He has repaired more than one of my watches. I will take you there tomorrow.” At that news, Hans was overjoyed.



David Guess what, team. We may have started our search.

Sandra Yee-haw!

Owen I’d yee-haw too, but I’m not sure what to do with this story.

Anna Don’t expect a solution to rise above its claims or its track record.

David That was eloquent, Anna.

Anna Thanks.

Liz Don’t go down a path if it never promised eternal life.

Geoff And don’t go down a path if it never demonstrated eternal life.

Barb Okay Geoff, how exactly does one *demonstrate* eternal life?

Owen If someone was raised from the dead, or even physical healing.

Tyler Just because a path doesn’t promise something, should you give up on it? Maybe the cure will be discovered later.

Elliot It’s possible, but what a long shot. It’d be like Maria searching the back walls of a room for a secret passageway to the outside.

Tyler Which one of you is Maria?

Hank Friday’s story.

Paul So what are some futile remedies?

Cooper Self-help methods. Think of all the books, seminars, encounter groups, and diets out there.

Jose They're appealing, but they fail Anna's two tests.

Barb What about science?

Cooper Same thing. Science has done amazing things, but it can't fix my watch. It never did, and it never said it could, at least so far.

Barb You mean you want to skip past science just like that?

Hank Oh, come on. You weren't really thinking science was going to give you immortality.

Elliot Science has made amazing progress.

Jose But does it pass the two tests?

Elliot Not yet, but it could be coming soon.

Cooper Didn't someone just say that would be like Maria searching the back walls for a secret passageway?

Elliot (closing his eyes and tilting his head back) Ouch!

Hank And I can't wait fifty years for science to *maybe* find an answer.

Mary Me neither.

Sandra I thought of another one. Extra-terrestrials.

Geoff This could get interesting.

Mary I'm sorry to disappoint you, Geoff, but this might be a very short discussion. They also fail both tests. Even if you believe reports of alien sightings, they neither promise eternal life nor have they demonstrated the power to give it.

David I like it. We don't spend hours trying to prove whether alien abductions are real. We sidestep the whole issue. It's efficient, yet we don't compromise our search.

Geoff I don't like loose ends.

Jose Keep your eye on the goal, man.

Cooper Related to the topic of science, can we talk about creation versus evolution?

Karl Why?

Cooper If there is evidence for a creator in nature, then it answers a pretty important question.

Karl It could, but it's not our question.

Cooper I've been reading up on this and was hoping we could debate it. Isn't the existence of God a big part of eternal life?

David Karl's right. Our search is for eternal life, and we won't deviate from it. If there is a God, I suspect we will run into him while on this journey.

David wrote the words "Futile Remedies" on a card, attached it to a marble stone, and set the stone at his feet.

David Hear ye, hear ye, members of the covenant. This is where you reap the reward of your devotion. You get to vote. A vote of yes means we deviate down one of the alternate paths: self help, science, aliens, creation versus evolution. If that well runs dry, we return to the book. A vote of no means we continue with the book. There are presently nine members in the covenant. Three-fourths must vote one way or the other. Math geeks, how many is that?

Paul Seven. What happens if we don't get at least seven yes or no votes?

David To be honest, I'm not sure. Here we go. How many vote yes? That's Barb and Cooper. How many vote no? That's me, Paul, Sandra, Mary, Liz, Jose and Anna.

David started a second pillar next to the first one, which he had named "Attitudes." The new pillar was named "Non-religious Paths."

After the meeting, Anna told David, "I appreciate the job you're doing leading the group."

"Thanks. How do you like it so far?"

"I look forward to coming here."

"Really? That's nice to hear. Do you live far from here?"

"Not too far, five minutes. Can I ask you something about the book?"

"Sure."

"It's been all right so far," Anna said, "but what if it goes sour?"

"We dump it," David confided. "But so far it's been helpful. I'll see you next time?"

"Yeah, see you then. Good night."

"Good night."

The next day, Mary was relaxing at home when her son returned from grocery shopping. He had come into town to stay with her a few days. As he was putting food away, he commented, "Mother, do you think these meetings three nights a week are a good idea? Shouldn't you be resting?"

"Why? So I can live one more month? You don't think anything will come from the meetings do you."

“Haven’t these issues been debated for centuries? What do you expect to find that others didn’t?”

“Others have debated, but I have not. This is the only life I have. If there’s a chance of paradise, I have to find out for myself.”

“I hate to see you waste the time you have left on an empty dream.”

“How do you know I’m wasting my time? I know for a fact you haven’t studied this topic.”

Her son scoffed. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure out there’s nothing after death.”

“I haven’t figured it out yet. How is it you’re so sure you’re right with such little effort?”

He threw up his hands and walked out of the kitchen. “I tried. Never mind.”

## Wednesday

A middle-aged woman by the name of Latisha came for her first meeting. David’s living room was getting full.



## Incomplete Sources of Truth

There once was a stone-age tribe that shunned all contact with the civilized world. Although their primitive village was not far from a modern town, no one had ever ventured there. One year, their main food source failed them, and they faced starvation. The villagers came together to discuss the crisis. Many options were presented, but none showed promise. Finally, they talked about the only choice left, going to the *very large village* to see if food could be found there. The tribal chief asked for people’s opinions.

A man stood up and said, “Years ago the gods spoke into my heart and informed me about that place. They made it clear that we may walk into their dwellings and take whatever food we need, without saying a word.”

Another one countered. “I too had a vision, but not like yours. The voice told me that they are not human; look at how they dress. They would never show us hospitality.”

A woman interjected, “Should we not look to life’s experiences to inform us? Many people in our own village have shown me kindness over the course of my life. Therefore, no one in the very large village will do us any harm.”

Someone else jumped in. “You lived a sheltered life. The people I’ve known are selfish. To avoid starvation, we will have to take their food by force. My spear is sharpened and ready.”

Next a man stood up. “Go to the outskirts of the large village and look for yourselves as I have. I saw no cattle, crops, or fruit trees. There were strange huts which they rarely leave. There is no food there.”

Still another stepped forward to say, “I also observed that village. I witnessed amazing things, which a man cannot describe. I say they are descended from the gods. We should take what little food we have and offer it to them in worship.”

Finally a wise old sage stood up in their midst. “I have heard your ideas, but they are all speculation. This is obvious because you contradict one another. If we are to know whether that place will deliver us from starvation, we must travel there and ask them. Come along.” The sage began to hike down the trail toward the very large village.



Liz      That sage was their David.

David    I’m no sage. What are your impressions?

Owen    Their conclusions were wild and went in six different directions.

Anna    I saw three sources for their ideas: an inner voice, life experiences, and observation of the village.

Cooper   Based on the title, I would say the moral is that these three are incomplete sources of information and can mislead us.

Jose     The large village represents a potential source of eternal life. Like us, the stone-age tribe knew very little about it. Hopefully we don’t start guessing like they did. But what does observing the village represent?

Paul     I think it stands for observing nature, or the creation if you like.

Sandra   If the story is saying we can’t learn about spiritual truths from an inner voice, life experiences, and nature, then I disagree. I have learned much from all three.

- Tyler Me too. I've learned from the latter two, but I'll pass on the voices in my head. I think the book is off the mark.
- Karl The story doesn't say that nothing can be learned from these. This is shown by the word *incomplete* in the title. All these are valid sources of truth. Rather, the story is warning us not to rely on them exclusively.
- Mary I get it. These teach us many things, but they don't tell us enough about eternal life.
- Owen Couldn't God speak to my heart and tell me how to find it?
- Paul He could, but it might also be your mind playing tricks on you. Without external corroboration, you have no way of knowing. That is why it's incomplete.
- Barb You just threw out the foundations of all religions.
- Paul You are partially right, Barb.
- Geoff Why do we need this story? Are people really like this?
- Cooper Some have carelessly assumed their emotions or thoughts were God speaking. Others imagine they can reconstruct the afterlife completely from their experiences. Still others look at nature and think they can extract a road map to heaven from it.
- Elliot We know many of those people are wrong because, like the sage said, they contradict one another.
- Mary I suppose many of them would assume the others are wrong, but not themselves.
- Jose But we've had our attitudes cleaned up, and we are willing to admit that we might be the ones in error.
- Karl In theory.
- Liz This is like the assumptions story, where someone tries to build an entire man from a single tooth.
- David Well said, Liz. When searching for eternal life, we need the whole truth. Let's hike to the large village.
- Latisha Some of you may have heard of near-death experiences, where someone dies for a few minutes and has a vision of heaven. I think they are real, and they give me a lot of hope.
- Anna I think it's one more incomplete source we must be cautious about. We can't independently verify these visions, and they typically don't tell you how to get to heaven.
- Latisha It still gives me hope.

David Thanks for bringing it up, Latisha. After you are here a while, you will understand our carefulness. We really want to get the right answer. Now the covenant members can vote. We touched on inner voices, experience, nature, and near death visions. Does anyone want to detour into these topics for further study? (Sandra raised her hand.)

David The vote is no, eight to one.

David put the words “Incomplete Sources of Truth” on a stone and laid it on top of the one labeled “Futile Remedies.” These were the stones in place so far.

PILLAR 1 *Attitudes*

Will to Live

Humility

Sacrifice

Assumptions

Finding Truth

Deception

Trust

Searching

PILLAR 2 *Non-religious Paths*

Futile Remedies

Incomplete Sources of Truth

Afterward, Karl chatted with Hank. “So Hank, do you have a family?”

“I’m a widower.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay. Been a long time now. I still visit her grave at the Ashbow cemetery, the one right next to downtown. Our son has kids, but they live a long way from here, so I don’t see them much.”

“Why haven’t you joined the covenant? You’ve been here every time.”

“I don’t need no necklace to get me here, and I’ll leave the voting to you younger folk. I should have been doing this years ago, but now I’m tired. All this hype about enjoying the golden years, what a joke. Our bodies fall apart, and death relentlessly draws near. What’s golden about that? But you’re not supposed to talk about that. It’s not positive. That’s why I come here. At least you people don’t have your head in the sand. And tell your friend David, he’s all right.”

Friday

Before they started, Liz said to the group, “My roommate thinks our meetings are very odd, and she thinks the necklace and covenant are the weirdest of all. I told her this is not a game. She keeps bugging me to go to my photography club instead. ‘That would be more fun,’ she says.”

Someone suggested, “She could come to a meeting to see what it’s like.”

“I asked her, but she’s afraid someone will try to convert her.”



## Anti-religious Bias

There once was an orphanage filled with lonely children. Conditions were unpleasant due to a perpetual lack of funds. Most of the orphans had languished there for years. One day, a new social worker was assigned. She wanted loving homes for each of them, and through considerable effort, she found a group of potential families. She arranged for them to come to the orphanage on a certain day to meet with the kids. Thankfully, several children found their way into new homes that day.

At the end of the day, the social worker noticed some orphans loitering in the yard, a group of teenagers who had been at the orphanage a long time. None of them had been placed with a family that day, since the older ones were given the choice of vetoing potential adoptions. Some had not even attended the interviews, and those who did rejected all offers. The social worker asked them why.

The first one told her, “I decided long ago to never talk about the subject of adoption.”

Another one said, “Years ago, a boy who had been adopted by a family did something dreadful to me, so I’ve shunned adoption ever since.”

Another youth told her, “Their rituals are weird, doing everything together, family pictures. What if I had to sing songs around a piano. Ugh.”

An orphan girl, said, “Those parents were a different color than me. I’m loyal to my own kind.”

“What about you?” she asked another boy.

“My grandpa was an orphan and so was my father. I’m not going to abandon my family heritage.”

Her frustration mounting, the social worker inquired of one more girl, who replied, “Adoption is fake. I don’t know where those kids went, but it wasn’t to live with a family.”

“Who told you that nonsense?”

“I started believing it when I was six, and I will never question it.”



Anna I thought we were done with the attitude adjustments.

David It seems we will be encountering religions soon. That topic is burdened with its own biases.

Elliot What? We’re already going to religion?

Cooper What did you expect? It’s either science or religion, and we all know science won’t have an answer any time soon.

Jose There have got to be other options beside those two.

Cooper Like what? In case you forgot, the goal is immortality.

David This group follows the book, until we vote otherwise. Let’s talk about the story.

Mary The moral is how emotional baggage can keep us from something good.

Sandra Did you notice how each reason paralleled a common argument for avoiding religion?

Paul I suppose many of us thought their reasons for staying in the orphanage were silly.

Geoff I sure did.

Liz It’s easy to say that about someone else’s bias, but if the emotional baggage is your own, it’s a lot harder to unload.

David That’s the heart of it. What irrational biases do we each have that could cause us to refuse eternal life, if it’s offered through religion?

Hank If you’re thinking, “Religion. Yuck!” My advice is, get over it.

Karl That’s one way of putting it.

Tyler It’s not that easy.

Barb I’m with you, Tyler. If you knew my background, you’d understand.

Owen No one said it could be done overnight.

Paul You're right, Owen. It takes effort to purge ourselves of religious bigotry.

Latisha Bigotry? That's too strong a word.

David Or it could be right on target. Who wants to take a stab at defining the word *religion*?

Anna Some folks come upon spiritual truths, and they tell the rest of us.

David Concise. How about defining the word *prophet*?

Liz That's one of those folks Anna just talked about.

Since no one had anything else to say, David attached "Anti-religious Bias" to a stone and started a third pillar called "Religious Attitudes."

Jose Aren't we going to vote on this?

David I don't think we need to vote on attitudes like this, but I don't mind checking. Does anyone in the covenant believe that having an anti-religious bias is a good thing? (No one flinched.) If you don't speak up, we expect you to carry no religious prejudice from here on.

David stood up and waited several seconds to let the point sink in. A few stared at the floor.

David This Sunday I'll be starting the door-to-door survey I told you about. Come if you're interested. Meet at my house at one p.m.

After the meeting, some stayed around to visit. Cooper and Jose got into an argument and got so loud that David asked them to move into the backyard. Anna headed over to talk with David, but Liz got to him before she did. Anna waited around, but they went on for a long time. They also seemed to be enjoying the conversation a little too much, so Anna left.

When most of the rest had left, Karl asked David, "Didn't you tell me once that your Jewish relatives had a strong disgust for one religion in particular?"

David sighed, "They did. I've got my own baggage, and unloading it isn't going to be easy."

Those who attended the discussions so far:

David	Mary	Cooper	Owen
Karl	Liz	Hank	Geoff
Paul	Jose	Anna	Tyler
Sandra	Barb	Elliot	Latisha

Sunday morning, with a cup of tea in hand, David stepped out his front door to pick the newspaper off the steps. Glancing at the front page as he returned inside, he almost choked on his tea. The front page featured an article headlined: “Local Man Leads Group in Search of Eternal Life.” A picture of his house accompanied the article. Landing in his easy chair, David read it with apprehension. To his relief it gave a fair portrayal, and his was the only name given, but he wondered who they had interviewed for it.

A half hour later Karl called. “Did you read it?”

“I read it,” David said. “Must have been a slow news week.”

“Your living room might not be big enough anymore.”

“You think we’ll be flooded with new people?”

“We’ll know tomorrow night. Should be fun.”

David said, “I’m worried about more cars parked on the street. How long before my neighbors complain?”

“You’ve got that empty lot next to your house.”

“That’s not mine. I can’t just use it for parking.”

“You may have to.”

“We’ll see . . . Karl, I need to ask you something.”

“Is it why I haven’t joined the covenant?”

“Yes.”

Karl answered, “I’ve been waiting for you to ask. Nothing personal, but I’m not wired that way. It’s worked great for you guys. Don’t worry, I’ll still be there.”

“Fair enough. You coming this afternoon?”

“I’ll wait and see if you come back alive. Maybe next time.”

At one o’clock that afternoon, two people came for the door-to-door visits, Anna and Jose. David told them, “Here’s what I was thinking. After we greet them, we say we are doing research, which is true. Then we ask this question: ‘Would you be willing to tell us what you believe about eternal life?’ If they seem willing to talk, maybe we ask other questions. We are there to gather information, not debate.”

“Sounds good,” they said.

“Is anyone else sweating besides me?” David asked.

“Oh yeah,” Anna said.

“Big time,” added Jose.

They deliberately drove to a part of town far away from where any of them lived.

They knocked on the first door. A middle-aged man opened it. When they asked their question, he said, “I decided long ago that I never talk to anyone about religion.” When they asked him why that was, he said, “I can’t tell you, because I never discuss the subject.”

They thanked him and headed down the sidewalk.

They went to the next house, where a woman said, “Are you that group that was in the today’s newspaper?” David told her they were. When they asked her the question, she replied, “No thanks, I’ll pass.”

As they left the house, Jose said, “We aren’t learning much.”

Anna commented, “We’re learning that people don’t want to talk about it.”

At the next house, a young man answered that he believed he would go to heaven. “Interesting,” David said. “Would you mind telling us why you believe that?”

“Because I believe it, and I have always believed it.”

“Very good, but what convinced you to believe it?”

“Because I decided long ago to believe it.”

At another house, an elderly man answered that eternal life isn’t important. Jose asked if he would explain why. “What’s to explain? It’s not important. I’m not worried about what happens when I die.”

In the next house, they found a man with a strong foreign accent. He was quite willing to talk and answered several questions. At the end he stated, “I firmly believe it doesn’t matter whether a religious faith is true or not, as long as it promotes peace between us.”

When the three of them were back on the sidewalk, Anna said, “This is making my head spin.”

David nodded in agreement. “It is rather unsettling. Let’s try one more house.”

A woman came to the door, and they asked her their question. She said, “I’m surprised to see you doing this. Don’t you know Western culture has an unwritten rule that we never discuss spiritual topics except in the rare regulated setting? I like the rule. It keeps conversations limited to shallow subjects like food and sports. It intimidates you religious types from bringing up a subject we’d rather avoid. The rule works, since you seldom hear people

discussing these ultimate questions. I suppose what you are doing would be considered wise in primitive cultures, but in this enlightened country it's considered bad manners. The rule was probably started by atheists who hate religion, like me. If you believed in a Devil, I suppose he'd be delighted with this rule. So, are there any *other* topics you'd like to talk about?"

## Monday

Before the meeting, Elliot pulled Jose aside. "How did it go Sunday?"

"Scary," Jose said.

"Really? I thought it would be boring. I'm definitely going next time."

Because of the newspaper article, fifteen new people showed up. Two end-tables had to be moved into the hallway. David opened all the windows and set up a couple fans to get air movement. He gave the newcomers a grand welcome and did his best to bring them up to speed in ten minutes. He explained the book, the covenant, and their progress so far.

Elliot and Owen announced they wanted to enroll in the covenant, and David gave them necklaces.

David asked if there were questions. One of the newcomers piped up, "I am a Buddhist. You people are seeking immortality because you are concerned about dying. May I suggest that your desire to cling to your lives is the true problem? If you will give up attachment to your life, then you will start down the road to happiness."

Karl asked, "How do you know that attachment is the problem?"

"The Buddha taught this."

"You're ahead of us. We haven't even reached religions yet. If it's proven that Buddhism teaches the truth, then I will be the first to act upon your suggestion."

David explained, "A few weeks ago we started as if we knew nothing, and we have been slowly building pillars of truth. There they are by the picture window."

"That sounds wise," the Buddhist said. "What have you learned so far?"

"Mostly that we might be wrong," shouted Hank.

"Oh, I see. Well, I wish you success in building upon that promising start."

They were about to begin the story when someone else asked to speak. “Don’t you think focusing on the next life makes you neglect this one?”

Latisha said, “I’m of the opinion that we can focus on the next life and be a better person here, both at the same time. If people are eternal and not disposable, we have all the more reason to treat them with the utmost care.”

Cooper added, “I used to spend my evenings playing video games. I’m pretty sure what I’m doing now is an improvement.”



## Anti-supernatural Bias

Ken and Susan lived in a small town with their son Allen, who was in the seventh grade. Ken’s cousin also lived in that town, and he was the town’s mayor and had an only son named Brent, also in the seventh grade. A few weeks into the new school year, Allen came to his mother and told her that Brent was picking on him. Susan didn’t take it seriously at first, but it got worse. Allen’s school work suffered and he threw fits when leaving for school in the morning. Susan had trouble dealing with the seventh grade teacher and knew she needed her husband’s support to solve the problem. She brought Allen to Ken and had him describe the bullying.

Ken said, “I’ve known my cousin all my life and his son Brent since he was born. They are pillars of the community. There is no way Brent’s doing that. There has to be another explanation.”

Susan was dumbfounded, but didn’t press the issue. Next week, when Allen had been bullied again, Susan brought him to her husband, but Ken had the same response.

On a third occasion, Ken asked his son, “Allen, you have known Brent for several years. What is the nicest thing he ever did for you?”

“A year ago some kids were throwing rocks at me. Brent chased them away.”

“Anything else?”

“Once he showed me where his secret tree house was.”

“Thank you Allen, you may go. Susan, until you have real proof, please don’t bother me with these fantasies.”

Susan contacted Ken’s close friend Leo. She explained everything and asked him to reason with her husband. Leo stopped by and sat down with

his friend. “Ken, it seems to me you have a blind spot when it comes to your cousin and his son. Why don’t you believe your own son?”

“You know how people get their facts wrong, or he could even be lying. Besides, Brent has actually been kind to Allen, more than once.”

“How do you know that?”

“Allen told me himself.”

“Why aren’t you accusing your son of getting the facts wrong or lying with those stories? Don’t you see how that exposes your bias?”

“Look,” said Ken, “I’ve been at my cousin’s when Brent and Allen were playing together, and I never saw bullying. How convenient that this always seems to happen only when I’m not looking. There is never any hard evidence like a bruise or a photograph. I’m expected to put my faith in something that leaves room for doubt.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Just last year Allen was telling us stories about his invisible friend, who lives in the woods behind our house.”

“Ken, are you telling me you cannot distinguish the difference between a child’s fantasy and reality?”

“Why should I believe the only son of this town’s mayor is a bully, when there is not a shred of scientific evidence for it?”

Leo exclaimed, “There is evidence, but your prejudice won’t let you acknowledge it.”

“You’re never going to get me to believe it.”

Leo headed for the door. “In that you are right.”



Latisha Ken didn’t want to believe.

Owen He had to defend his preconception. I counted half a dozen arguments he used to convince himself.

Paul I’ve seen every one of those used to explain away reports of miracles.

David Who wants to define anti-supernatural bias?

Liz A person is convinced that miracles are impossible. When they are given evidence, they keep looking until they find the hole in the evidence that they know has to be there.

Sandra If they can't find the hole now, they predict it will turn up eventually. So the most hardened cases don't even need a hole.

Elliot I don't say miracles are impossible, but I have yet to see convincing evidence of one.

Sandra I've seen a miracle.

Elliot Are you role playing?

Sandra No. (Everyone stared at Elliot.)

Elliot Great. If I borrow Ken's excuses, you guys will be all over me. Okay, I'd like to hear about it Sandra.

Sandra I'll tell you after the meeting.

David Up until now, when I've heard about a miracle, I quickly dismissed it. My only reason was that I was sure miracles can't happen. This would be a radical shift in my thinking.

Tyler I've heard about miracles too, but I'm pretty sure they weren't real.

Cooper Why not?

Tyler There's never hard evidence—uh, people like to make things up—I'm not convinced, that's all.

Mary Tyler, you've got to love the truth and hate your biases.

Jose I have to admit, I've assumed miracles aren't real, but I might have been like Ken. I agree with you David, it's a big change in perspective.

A newcomer named Philip jumped into the discussion.

Philip Most of the stories of miracles are from ancient times, and we know people back then were prone to believe in them.

Karl If you use the words *we know* around here, you need to back it up.

Philip The ancients made up a lot of mythical stories, didn't they?

Paul Our local cinema portrays a different magical being every week. We make a lot more myths than they ever did.

Philip That's for our entertainment. Oh, I see. Maybe the ancient myths were the same thing. But some religions have miracles that were not for entertainment. We know those didn't happen.

Cooper How do you *know* that?

Philip People were simple-minded back then, so they made up stories.

Paul Even if you are right about them being simple-minded, how does that prove they made up the stories?

Philip Well, I guess it doesn't prove it.

Cooper I've read a lot of ancient history. The only difference between them and us is that someone hadn't invented the transistor yet.

Philip But they believed God sends the rain.

Sandra I believe God sends the rain.

Philip Maybe we can get a historian to come to the next meeting.

David I teach history at Vanberth.

Philip Okay then. What do you think?

David I agree with Cooper. Those people were the same as us, except for our technology. Philip, up until today, I thought like you, that miracles can't happen. This story has opened my eyes to consider that I was doing this purely out of prejudice.

David labeled a stone "Anti-supernatural Bias."

Tyler Aren't you going to vote on this? Some of you don't believe in miracles.

David Including me. This story doesn't say you have to, but it does say be open to their possibility, so you aren't blinded to the truth like Ken. Do you think anyone in the covenant would disagree, Tyler?

Tyler I guess not.

After many had left, David said, "We can't keep meeting in this living room. I could barely breathe. I was thinking I could rent a big tent and put it in the backyard. What does everyone think?"

"It is spring. That gives us half a year," Jose said.

"What about the cost?" Sandra said, "Maybe we should take up an offering."

"Over my dead body," objected David. "Don't worry about that. I've got some vacation money saved up. This is way better than Disney World."

"Because it's not make-believe. It's real," Jose said. "I say go for it. I'll help you set it up." Others also offered to help.

Paul had left David's house immediately after the meeting. He hurried home to his apartment to welcome his father who was driving in from out of town for a visit. Paul had been telling his dad about the meetings, so when he arrived he asked about them. "Doesn't this David Ruben teach at Vanberth, where you went to school?"

"Yes," Paul said, "but I was there twenty-five years ago, way before him."

“Anything new happen since we talked on the phone?”

“Our size doubled tonight because of a newspaper article. We are still working through things like bias and prejudice.”

“Sounds tedious.”

“It might be for some, but I’m enjoying it. You know, Dad, it’s funny. I feel at ease during the discussion time, but the hardest part for me is right after the meeting is over.”

“Really, why is that?”

“Everyone immediately finds a couple people to chat with, but somehow I’m left standing alone. I feel embarrassed, as if everyone notices me, but I don’t know how to break into the little conversation groups once they are formed. It seems to come naturally for everyone else.”

“Doesn’t anyone come over to chat with you?”

“No,” Paul said tersely.

“Why don’t you just go home?”

“I’d feel awkward bolting for my car right away. I don’t want to be a misfit who shuns social contact. I do okay one-on-one or in a structured meeting, but in a crowded social setting I’m paralyzed.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you son. Your mother was more like you. It’s a shame she’s not around anymore to give advice.”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds,” Paul said. “I’ve gotten used to it over the years.”

# CHAPTER 5

## Wednesday

Paul was running late and arrived a few minutes after seven. He hurried up the sidewalk and saw a sign taped to the front door telling people to come in without knocking. Paul entered and was alarmed to see the living room empty. *Did I miss an announcement?* Another sign directed him out the back door. As he stepped into the backyard, he discovered a large tent with chairs for several dozen people set in concentric circles. Temporary flood lamps surrounded the yard. The meeting hadn't started; the crowd was still adjusting to the new location. It made for a lovely setting, surrounded by fields and woods. The view to the south stretched for a mile over a small valley to the hills beyond. Those who had weathered several weeks in the living room were delighted to be outside, especially since it was almost April.

David started, "Does anyone have a question before we begin the story?"

Someone from the crowd said, "I just started coming. My roommate says you are obsessed with death. What do I tell her?"

"Tell her we are obsessed with avoiding death," David joked.

"She said she's going to heaven, and thinks the rest of you probably will, so she doesn't see what the big deal is."

"I'm a little uncomfortable leaving it at *probably*. If she knows something we don't, would she come and help us?"

"I asked her to come, but she says she's busy with her garden."



## Morality

Several men were sitting in a county jail, waiting for trial. Since they had nothing to do, a prisoner named Joe wandered around, asking the others about their case.

“What are you in for?” Joe asked one of them.

“I stole a few cars, but I’m not worried. I volunteered for years at the food shelf, I pay all my taxes, and I was recently voted employee of the month. With all that, do you think the judge will make a big deal over a few automobiles?”

“You’re probably right. You seem like a nice fellow.”

“What about you?” Joe asked the next man. “Why did you get arrested?”

“I sold drugs. Gotta pay the rent somehow. Have you heard about that fellow sitting there in the corner? I heard he raped and murdered a teenage girl. How can you say I’m evil compared to a guy like that? The judges all know about this creep. With him around, I expect a favorable verdict.”

“He does make the rest of us look pretty good,” Joe replied, and then he asked a third fellow, “What’s your story?”

“I haven’t paid my taxes in ten years. I don’t believe the concept of right and wrong exists, so why should I fear punishment?”

“I heard you’ve got Judge Lockman. He’ll throw a guy in prison for having his shirt unbuttoned.”

“That’s not fair! They can’t let him get away with that.”

Finally, Joe saw a man leaning against the wall and asked him what he was in for.

“I cut some guy up with a knife. He’ll live. I expect to be out of here and back home soon. Look around this room. We aren’t that bad; I don’t know why we are even in here. You expect me to believe that we are all hardened criminals? You’ve talked to these men. Didn’t you find them friendly?”

“Yes.”

“Sure there are a few bad ones, like that fellow sitting in the corner. He deserves to be locked up, but the rest of us are basically good people who made a couple mistakes.”

As they were talking, the court clerk arrived and posted the times when each was to stand before a judge in the next few days.



Karl Those men had a twisted sense of right and wrong.

Sandra What's the difference between them and us?

Owen Nothing.

Tyler What? Speak for yourself. I haven't done any jail time.

Owen I mean in their attitude toward evil.

Anna I'm having a little trouble seeing the similarity.

Sandra It's only a difference in degree. Replace their crimes with gossip, anger and lust.

Liz Those things aren't nearly as bad as selling drugs, stealing cars and knife fights.

Jose You're doing exactly what they did. The guy sitting in the corner made them feel they weren't that bad. He was their savior.

Mary Strange savior.

David Aren't we inwardly relieved when someone behaves worse than us because we think that makes us a better person? But that logic is faulty to the core.

Mary We let the worst criminals set the standard.

Geoff (Who had read the story.) There's an addendum to the story. It says, "The guy in the corner was actually innocent. He was arrested by mistake, but everyone assumed he was guilty."

Cooper Imagine that. All those guys thought they were better than him.

Karl And don't forget the first guy who mistakenly thought his good deeds would cancel his guilt.

Paul David, do you mind if I bring up four points on this topic?

David Go ahead.

Paul Number one: We all believe morality exists, right and wrong. We only disagree on the specifics. Anyone dispute that?

Latisha Even the guy in the story who said morality didn't exist, changed his mind five seconds later.

Paul Number two: Committing wrong should not be allowed to continue. It should be stopped, either by the reformation of the evil-doer or else by force.

Geoff Especially when it's being done to me. (The group laughed.)

Paul Number three: We all do evil. Does anyone dispute that?

Liz Could you clarify what you mean?

Paul Every one of us has done something wrong. Anyone disagree?

People looked around to see if anyone would speak up. David started to look agitated.

Paul Number four: In our pride, we minimize the evil we do and focus on the evil committed by others.

Elliot Yeah, so what's the point?

David What's the point? One of his four points has to be wrong, otherwise we've got a serious problem.

Elliot Who's got a problem?

David Mankind! Doing what's wrong is wrong; we all agree on that. Yet we all keep doing wrong. Why?

Latisha Aren't you overreacting? Most of us aren't that bad.

David That's exactly what the men in the jail said!

Tyler But we aren't criminals like them.

David You conveniently draw the line that separates good and bad between you and them.

Liz David, why are you out to condemn us?

David I'm after the truth. Don't you get it? That story is dead on. The whole world does evil, and we all know it's wrong. But we don't care, and we keep on doing it. Why did it take me so long to see this? Am I the only one?

Paul I agree with you, David.

Elliot Okay, I'll play along. Who's going to punish me? I think God probably doesn't exist.

David I'm a little uncomfortable leaving it at *probably*.

Cooper That's a good question. What does God think about our evil? Is he just like us where evil doesn't bother him that much, as long as it isn't really bad?

Jose Maybe we should find out.

David Maybe? Maybe? *We have* to find out.

Mary I thought you weren't sure whether God exists.

David I'm not. But I need to find out.

Karl David has a point. The rest of you sound like the men in the jail. There's something in human nature that doesn't want to admit we are wicked, although we have no problem admitting others are.

Anna Why is this story in the book? What does it have to do with searching for eternal life?

David Motivation.

There were no more comments, so David attached the word “Morality” to a stone.

David Since some have challenged the fact that we didn’t vote on the last couple, we will go back to voting. Is morality important in the search for eternal life?

Elliot and Liz voted no, the other nine voted yes. David laid the stone on the pillar.

Afterward Karl said to David, “That got to you, didn’t it?”

“I’m still dealing with the anti-supernatural bias from last meeting, and now this. What’s next? You know Karl, this search just expanded to something beyond looking for eternal life.”

“Expanded to what?”

“Staying out of jail.”

After the meeting, Owen pulled out of his parking spot in front of David’s house and noticed Anna walking down the block. He pulled up next to her, jumped out, and said, “Anna can I give you a ride?”

“Thanks for offering. My car is at the mechanic, so I took the bus here.”

“This isn’t the best place for a woman to be walking after dark,” he cautioned. Owen opened the passenger door in front of Anna.

Before stepping into the car, she paused. “That was some discussion tonight. It made me see things in a different light. How about you?”

“I’ve known about that for a long time.”

“Really?” replied Anna.

“Oh yeah. When Paul explained how we all do what’s evil, it wasn’t news to me. I sin in thought, word, and deed every day.”

Anna drew back a step.

“But it’s okay because I feel bad afterward.”

Anna looked at the open car door. “You know, it’s a nice evening. I think I’d enjoy the walk to the bus stop.”

“Are you sure it’s safe?”

“I’ll be okay. Thanks.” Anna strode briskly down the sidewalk. After she had gone fifty feet, she glanced back over her shoulder.

Friday, April 2

As the first few took their seats, David said to Cooper, “Where’s your necklace?”

“I forgot it on my kitchen table.”

“You’ve still got time to go back and get it.”

“Come on.” Cooper protested. “I’m not driving all the way home just for some piece of jewelry. I’ll bring it next time.”

David decided not to press the matter. Just then Paul showed up. Cooper took a look at his neck and said with a smug grin, “Hey, Paul, where’s your necklace?”

Paul put his hand on his neck and gasped, “Oh no, I forgot it! Sorry David; I’ll rush home and get it.”

David said, “That’s okay, just bring—,” but then he saw Paul already running toward his car.

David looked over to where Cooper had been sitting, but the chair was empty since he had decided to get up and stretch his legs.



## Fearing God

A small, privately owned company hired five new employees. The new workers received an orientation and were brought to their work area, where they began their assigned tasks. The owner, who was away on a long business trip, supervised the firm from afar by keeping in touch with management and issuing company directives. Over the next few weeks, it became evident that four of the new employees were not following the owner’s instructions, causing disruption throughout the company. Finally, their supervisor pulled them into a conference room to ask what the problem was.

The first one said, “After I worked here a few days, I got an idea for taking the company in a new direction. I’ve been busy doing research on it.”

“What makes you think the owner will agree with your new direction?” asked the supervisor.

“My idea will improve efficiency. I’m sure he’ll agree.”

The second employee answered, “I heard about the company directives, but I didn’t think they were important. I’ve got a lot to do on my job.”

“How do you think the owner feels about that?”

“I haven’t thought about the guy. Do I need to?”

The third employee replied, “When I saw the way the production floor was laid out, I couldn’t believe it. Whoever did that should not be running the company. And why is this owner taking such a long trip at this crucial time? He should be here.”

The fourth employee said, “I’ve worked here several weeks and have never seen this so called owner. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t exist.”

“I’ve seen him,” said the supervisor, “and so have other employees who’ve been here a while.”

“I’m not willing to take your word for it. I can think of several reasons why you might be lying, so at least one of those reasons has to be right. By the way, didn’t you hire five? Where is the other one?”

“She shows respect for the owner’s directives and follows them faithfully. I hope the next people I hire to replace you four will be just like her.”



Cooper I never liked that phrase, *fearing God*.

Paul shot a concerned glance at Cooper.

David How does this story define fearing someone?

Anna Recognizing their authority.

Sandra We’re expected to do that with our parents, teachers, bosses, government officials, and so on.

Paul The word *fear* doesn’t mean being terrified, as of a monster. It means understanding who’s in charge and what they will do to you if you defy their authority.

Geoff The man who runs a stop sign right in front of a police car doesn’t fear him.

Jose And he’s stupid, like those four employees.

Barb That’s fine, but what about we who think God doesn’t exist? I don’t think there is anyone to fear. And don’t tell me I’m like the fourth employee. That doesn’t motivate me.

David Maybe this will. I’m pretty close to you, Barb, in my belief about God. Can you look me in the eye and tell me that you have done everything in your power to prove there is no God?

Barb No. I guess that’s why I’m here.

- David Me too. So for me and you, Barb, and anyone else this applies to— for us, fearing God means finding out if he exists. This is one question you cannot afford to be wrong on. That’s enough about the fourth employee. What about the other three?
- Mary I might be guilty of being like the first employee. That person imagined what the owner was like, before they ever met him.
- Karl Me too, like the statement, “I’m sure he’ll agree.” I presume God thinks like me.
- Paul Some use that to prove atheism. They assume God would think and act just like them. When he doesn’t, they think they’ve proven he can’t exist.
- Karl Sounds arrogant.
- Jose The second employee reminded me of myself. I’ve always thought there’s a God out there, but I ignored him. Not anymore.
- Mary You go, Jose!
- David Anyone identify with the third employee?
- Anna I haven’t been too impressed with the way God runs the world. But, maybe my accusations aren’t deserved. What do I know about running the world?
- Sandra These four employees depict much of the world’s attitude toward God.
- David After our Sunday door-to-door visits, I’m inclined to agree.
- David wrote the words “Fearing God” on a card, attached it to a stone, and set it at his feet.
- David We will vote on this, but let me define it first. Fearing God means we will do whatever is in our power to find out the full truth about God—does he exist, and if so then what is he like? We won’t imagine him, ignore him or misjudge him. Who votes yes?
- All eleven raised their hands: David, Paul, Sandra, Mary, Liz, Barb, Jose, Cooper, Anna, Elliot, and Owen. David laid the stone on top of the Religious Attitudes pillar.

The next day, in Brooklyn, New York, Ezra Ruben slowly descended the stairs of his apartment building to get his mail. The handrail had been missing for months, so he reached his hand to the wall for balance. In his mail he found a large envelope. Ezra noticed Ashbow in the return address, but it wasn’t from his son. *It’s from Joseph. I wonder what I could be getting from David’s cousin.* Back in his apartment, Ezra opened the envelope and

removed a Sunday newspaper with a front page article about David's meetings.

As he read the article, his pulse quickened. When he finished, he stared out the window for a minute. Then he grabbed the paper and ran down the stairs. Walking as fast as he dared, he scurried to his friend's house three blocks down the street. Ezra pounded excitedly on the door.

A man opened the door and said, "What is it, Ezra? Is the building on fire?"

"Daniel, I must show you something." He shoved the paper into his hand and paced the floor while his friend read it.

"This is truly remarkable," said Daniel. "What do you think happened?"

"I have no idea!" shouted Ezra. "I haven't seen him utter a single prayer since his bar mitzvah."

"This is a good sign, don't you think?"

"Perhaps, but this group of his, it sounds kind of . . . unusual."

"Are you going to call him?" asked Daniel.

"Not now. I don't want to do anything that might distract him. He has to do this by himself. Oh my. When the relatives hear about this, what are they going to say?"

"It looks like they are getting a good sized crowd."

"That David," Ezra said, "he's a natural leader, like his namesake King David. When he used to play with Samuel, he would pick the teams, even though he was three years younger. He's also passionate like the other David, although sometimes too much. He always had a good heart. I'm surprised it took him this long to do something like this."

"I see they are meeting three evenings a week."

"That's my son. He never did anything halfheartedly. Those poor souls. I hope he doesn't have them doing pushups before every meeting."

## Monday

Before the meeting, David mentioned to Karl, "Have you noticed a few people nodding off during the meeting?"

"It is right after supper."

"I was thinking a little exercise at the start of the meeting would get our blood moving, like jumping jacks. But I'm not sure."

"Why aren't you sure?"

"I get this picture of my dad saying, 'David, relax.'"



## Comparing Religions

Li and Wang were traveling through a remote desert area. Sandstorms, a burning sun and a host of other troubles had overwhelmed them, so that they lost their mounts and supplies. They survived only by staggering into a small village, where the hospitable locals cared for them. After recovering, they traded their few remaining possessions for a camel. That was sufficient for travel to the nearest large city except for one precious supply. They needed to pack enough water to last two weeks. None of the nearby villages seemed to have a good water supply. However, a major source of water was rumored to be close by. Since there were four villages in that area, Li went to two of the villages and Wang went to the other two, to ask about the water source.

Afterward, they came together to compare what they had learned. Li said, "The first village told me plainly that there is only one well around here. It is a few miles to the north, a little out of our way. When I asked at the second village, they were adamant that no major water source was within a hundred miles. I asked how they survived and they told me they have learned the secret of obtaining moisture from dew and plants. They agreed that this would never be enough for a long journey."

"That is odd," said Wang. "The first village I talked with said there were plenty of wells all over this region. When I said we would be traveling to the east, they assured me we would find wells along that route. I inquired at the second village and they gave a very different story. They said there are no wells around here, and they practice a rain dance. It takes three days to go through the ritual, and it only rains on the area where the dance is performed, but they assured me it always works."

"What should we do," pondered Wang. "Which one is telling the truth?"

"It doesn't matter," said Li, "They all point to the truth."

"What?"

"Let's look at what they have in common," Li said calmly, "Water."

"That is all they have in common," countered Wang. "Beyond that, they completely contradict each other."

"Maybe they each have a portion of the truth."

"How would we know which parts are true? Even if we only use portions of their stories, they cannot be reconciled. Is there a well or not?"

Li said, “Are you telling me one village scrounges for water while another has an abundance? That would be extremely unfair. I won’t believe it.”

“Why are you so insistent that each village must possess equal knowledge about where to find water?”

“It’s risky to insist one village is right and another wrong. This is the kind of divisive mindset that leads to wars.”

“Listen to me, Li. We need water, and therefore we need the truth, even if it arouses someone’s anger. Give up your insistence that everybody must be equal. Life is filled with inequities. Let’s return to each village and question them more thoroughly. Perhaps we can find out if there really is a good water source near here.”

“Of course you are right, Wang. Let us go.”



David Does everyone agree that all religions can’t be right?

Latisha That may be the point of the story, but I’m not willing to concede it.

Geoff Me neither.

Liz I’m with them.

David I was trying to get a reaction. I think the story’s point is more about our attitude when comparing religions.

Elliot Li was so insistent on every village being partly right that it blinded him to reality.

Karl What’s behind that insistence?

David Let’s hear from Latisha, Geoff and Liz.

Latisha I think God has spoken through all religions.

Barb You mean God spoke through every kook who called himself a prophet, including those who led their followers to mass suicide?

Latisha Of course not. I mean the major world religions.

Owen Where’s the line between one and the other; it’s arbitrary.

Paul The major religions sharply disagree on the most fundamental concepts, like who created the universe and is there a God.

Latisha I’m aware of their differences. I think they all had the truth at one time, but it got distorted over the centuries. They still have some truth.

- Anna How do we know which part is the truth?
- Latisha The parts they have in common.
- Paul All they have in common is the idea of doing good. Everything else is up in the air, including the existence of eternal life and the means to get there.
- Latisha If they all had the truth at one time, shouldn't we study them all?
- Elliot You make that claim, but where's the evidence to support it? All we have now are religions that differ. The proof that they perhaps once agreed is lost. If you believe a theory with no evidence, isn't that bias?
- David He makes a good point, Latisha.
- Latisha I still believe they all have some truth.
- Liz I have a hard time accepting that some countries have a true religion and some have a fake.
- Cooper How does that make it untrue? I don't like that some countries have lots of food, but others are starving. Should I deny it and stop giving to relief organizations?
- Liz I can't believe God would do it that way.
- Jose Because if there were a God, he would think just like—
- Liz I know, I know, don't say it!
- Karl Liz, why are you blaming God for the existence of false religions? Couldn't it be people who have done this?
- Liz Then why doesn't he prevent it, making it easier to find the true faith?
- Karl Maybe for the same reason he hasn't stopped all the other evils we carry out against each other.
- Paul Clarification. God hasn't stopped all evil . . . yet.
- David How about you, Geoff?
- Geoff I know I sound like Li, but wars have been fought over religion.
- Sandra Wars are caused by violent and evil people. Religion is only one excuse. Other times the excuse is ethnic, political or economic. I agree with Wang. Should we handcuff our search for life just because someone else might fight over it?

A woman spoke up from the crowd.

- Woman I've lived in several non-western countries. People think that if some religions are right and some wrong, then whole countries are right and others are in error. This is not the case. The reality is that most people do not actively seek God. Their country's religion is

an empty label, both in the East and West. It is a mistake to view all the inhabitants of a country as Christian, Muslim or Buddhist. That may be true in their mouths and rituals, but most people are practical atheists because they ignore God. However, every country of the world does have a small minority who genuinely love God.

David prepared a stone with the words “Comparing Religions” and set it in front of him.

David Here is what we are voting on. We agree to not judge religions with a bias that insists they all have to be right, or all must have portions of the truth. We agree to call a religion false or man-made if the facts lead that way. We will give each religion the grade it deserves. How many vote yes? (Nine did.)

David How many vote no? (Latisha did.)

David Liz, you didn't vote.

Liz I can't make up my mind. Can I abstain?

David Since it won't affect the outcome, I guess that's okay this time.

Hank David, are you getting soft on us?

David placed the stone on top of the “Religious Attitudes” pillar.

The following evening, David was buying groceries at the store when he spotted his cousin Joseph in the next aisle. He felt like avoiding him but knew he had to talk to him sooner or later, so he pushed his cart in that direction. “Hi, Joseph.”

“David. We keep meeting each other.”

“I need to apologize for the last time we spoke.”

“Don't sweat it. I knew you meant well. I saw the article in the paper. Did they give you a fair shake?”

“It was well done, and it brought a lot more people. We ran out of space in my living room, so I pitched a big tent in the backyard.”

Joseph stopped pushing his cart. “You're meeting in your backyard?”

“We get thirty to forty people a night.”

“This is bigger than I thought. Come to think of it, I overheard someone talking about you the other day. When you get rich and famous, don't forget your family, okay?”

“Rich is something I won't get from this,” David said.

“Does your dad know about this?”

“I don't know what I would tell him. I need to do this on my own.”

Joseph moved down the aisle. “He's bound to find out sooner or later.”

# CHAPTER 6

Wednesday

Someone in the back asked, “Could you explain those three stacks of stones?”

David stood up and motioned with his hand at the pillars. “These are monuments to our stages in the journey. The first pillar has attitudes that affect our ability to discover truth. The second pillar is non-religious paths we set aside because we thought they offered minimal prospects for eternal life. The third pillar is attitudes that affect our evaluation of religions. These pillars portray our efforts to date. Everything we do going forward is built upon them.”

Another person said, “You’ve been meeting all these weeks, and you’ve talked mostly about attitudes?”

“That’s right,” boasted Jose. “We may be slow, but we are reeally ready.”



## Indigenous Religions

A long time ago in a far off land, there lived a race of people in a very large valley. Their land was surrounded on all sides by towering mountains, which no one had ever crossed. The valley was populated with numerous villages, where the people supported themselves by farming and raising livestock. The valley had natural advantages such as abundant water, fertile soil, and a favorable climate. It was a pleasant place to live except for one problem: the disease. The disease slowly ate away at a person’s body, attacking one part,

then another. Normal functions weakened gradually, until only a shadow of youthful vigor remained. Death came soon afterward. The biggest tragedy was that everyone got the disease. No exceptions.

At one end of the valley was a small town called Villa. One day a middle-aged man named James entered the village square. He jumped onto a short wall and called out to those passing by. “Listen, you people. We all suffer from this terrible disease, yet most of us have heard stories about a cure. Some say it can be found in this village, some in that, and some say there is none. Why should we sit here and waste away when health may be found down the road? At dawn tomorrow, I intend to set out in search of a cure. Is there anyone who would join me?”

When no one came forward, James continued to make his case. Most of the townspeople ignored him, but a few argued with him. After a time, a young man passed through the square and stopped to listen. When he heard the invitation, he drew near and said, “My name is John. If you would have me, I would like to join your mission. I think I can convince my young bride, Jane, to go also, as we have no children yet.” James was overjoyed, and they made plans to start on their pilgrimage first thing in the morning.

As they departed the square, an older man caught up to them and laid his hand on their shoulders. “I wish I could go with you, but I am too old to make the trip. I should have done what you are doing years ago, before the disease sapped my strength. I wish you the best of success, and if you find a cure, bring it back quickly.”

The next day, before the morning star disappeared in the east, the three pilgrims—James, John, and his wife Jane—set out on their adventure. Because Villa had been founded in recent years, they started toward the more ancient villages, thinking a cure would be found there. Going from village to village, they discovered that each had a local priest who seemed to administer some type of treatment, so they would stop and ask, “Tell us about the results of your treatment for the disease.”

The priest said, “I don’t know if it ever cured anyone. Only the gods know that.”

“Then why use it?”

“These rituals have been part of our village culture for thousands of years.”

“Do you know who started the treatment?”

“No one knows. It may have come from an ancient wise man.”

“Are there no historical records?”

“None at all.”

“Do you ever compare your practice with priests in other villages to see which is more effective?”

“Why? What matters is we’re loyal to our traditions, as they are to theirs.”

“Has any priest tried to apply your treatment outside this village?”

“No. Why do that?”

“Because the disease is rampant everywhere.”

“My job is to give people comfort. As for the disease, that is in the hands of the gods.”

“What do you know about the gods?”

“Not much.”

“The priests we talked to in other villages each describe the gods differently. Some say that village elders in the past were gods. Others say the gods have limited powers, and limited virtue.”

“They have their stories and we have ours.”

“Is your treatment documented?”

“No. It’s passed on by word of mouth.”

“Does your treatment come from the gods?”

“That isn’t clear. Some might say so.”

“Is there proof that your treatment ever cured the disease?”

“Proof? Not really. For some reason you are obsessed with a cure and how you can be sure it works. The goal of our treatment isn’t to cure the disease, but to maintain a sense of community and give people’s lives meaning and happiness.”

After that, the pilgrims traveled to an area where the succession of local priests had long ago been replaced by a different priesthood, one that was common to all the villages in that area. All that was left of the ancient priest-hoods was a mention in the history books. These books revealed how the medicine of the local priest was discarded for a newer treatment that had gradually spread through that part of the valley. John remarked, “I am not surprised that the local medicine was long ago deserted by these villagers. It offered no hope of healing the disease.”

His wife Jane agreed, “I think those priests would have agreed with you, since they never bothered to carry their medicine to a neighboring village.”

To be continued . . .



- Mary Did anyone else think the disease sounded like nothing more than aging and death?
- Anna Yes, but did you also notice that the pilgrims were searching like us? It's a little eerie. Who wrote that book?
- David The longing for immortality is timeless. Since the dawn of man, there probably have been people all over the world doing what we are doing.
- Karl We are finally on the road. The treasure hunt has begun.
- David Who wants to interpret the allegory?
- Owen I'll take a shot. As Mary said, the disease is aging and death. The valley is the world. The villages are ethnic groups. The priests stand for the local religion of each group. Most ethnic groups originally had an ancient indigenous religion. Many still do, mostly in the less developed parts of the world. In other parts of the world, the native religions have been extinguished by a major world religion like Buddhism, Islam or Christianity. These were the extinct religions talked about at the end of the story, like the Greek and Roman gods.
- Paul That was good, Owen. Have you been studying on the side?
- David I hope every one of you is reading about religions on your own.
- Jose I agree. Otherwise, how do we know if the book is giving a fair summary? What about this story? Was it accurate?
- Paul The story brought out that indigenous religions have no written scriptures, no historical record of their origin, no proofs for their beliefs, and an under-developed theology. That is close to the mark.
- Tyler It sure painted a pitiful picture of these religions, at least as a way to eternal life.
- Sandra The rest of the world would seem to agree. No one ever converts to these tribal religions. They add members only through birth.
- Geoff All they have going for them is they've been around a long time.
- Barb I can see where this is going. Isn't there one among them worth looking at?
- Tyler Sure, if anyone knows of one. Speak up.
- Barb What about the extinct religions? They aren't well known, so how would we know if one of those is a good candidate?
- Liz We don't, but their own followers gave up on it in exchange for something else. They knew a lot more about it than we do, and none of them thought it was worth keeping.

Latisha This represents a lot of faiths, practiced by a lot of people. It doesn't seem right to dismiss them so easily. We know almost nothing about them.

Elliot I feel the same way, Latisha. It seems we're moving too fast. But my gut tells me we won't find anything behind this door. Nobody else has, so why would we? They have no missionaries.

Cooper Very few who practice these indigenous religions are looking for eternal life. It's mostly about cultural rituals.

David If there are no more comments, we will vote on the indigenous religions. Remember, this doesn't cover the major world religions. I presume the book will get to those separately. How many vote to set these aside?

Ten voted yes. One voted no. David made a stone called "Indigenous Religions." He started a new pillar labeled "Set Aside Religions."

The next day, Barb and her husband were sitting on their back porch, enjoying a cool drink and the spring evening. Her husband asked her, "How's your church group going?"

"I keep telling you, it's not a church group. If it was, you wouldn't find me there."

"That's right. You're not too fond of the church."

Barb said, "You'd feel the same way if you'd met some of the characters I've had the *pleasure* of knowing. When I was little, I played with this girl whose family was very self righteous, and they made sure everyone knew it. They had religious stuff all over their house, and they never missed church on Sunday."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"The dad was a drunk, and the mom was a gossip. You wouldn't believe the foul language I heard in that house. That family is just one example. I could tell you more, but I'd better not for the sake of my blood pressure."

"So you figure all churches are like that?"

"I'll never find out 'cause I'm keeping my distance."

Barb's husband gazed into the distance with a thoughtful look on his face, so Barb asked, "What is it?"

"If there is a Christian paradise, that family which you so loathe would be the very cause of you missing it. Wouldn't that be like a Greek tragedy?"

Barb stood up with a grunt and went into the house.

## Friday

As seven o'clock approached, people streamed to the tent behind David's house. By now they were getting over forty people per night. Most came just to listen. Spring was in full bloom, and everybody was soaking it in. To many, it was like an outdoor play, for free. Someone volunteered to bring lemonade once a week.

As was his habit, David greeted people as they came around the side of his house. When Anna arrived, David told her, "I saved a seat for you next to mine." She offered a startled thank you, and spent the entire evening suppressing a smile.



## Confucianism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism

The pilgrims James, John and Jane continued their trek across the valley, in search of a cure for the disease. They entered a densely populated land of ancient villages. Most towns in that part of the valley had a local doctor of the same type. The pilgrims commented, "At last we found a place where more than one village agrees on the same medicine." They called at a doctor's dwelling and began to question him.

The doctor told them, "I practice Confucianism, an old and venerated tradition."

"What can you tell us about a cure for the disease?"

"Our tradition has nothing to do with curing the disease. That is for others to dabble in."

"We thought that since you were a doctor, you must have a way to alleviate our greatest illness."

"Not at all. Our practice is concerned only with promoting proper relationships between people to make for a better society."

"What about the gods or the beginning and end of the world?"

"We have nothing to say about those topics. That's for other professions."

Since this man did not promise the cure they were looking for, the pilgrims departed.

In that same land, the three sojourners heard of another type of healer, this one less formally established, so they sought one of its teachers.

The teacher explained, “Our way is called Taoism. Our founder lived a long time ago. He taught how each one can live in harmony with the natural forces of this world.”

“Did he explain how to cure the disease?”

“Not at all.”

“What about the gods, or the final destiny of the world?”

“No. He was only interested in helping us live in tranquility.”

“This sounds just like the Confucian man we talked with.”

“No, our path is very different from theirs. If you are interested in a cure for the disease, there was a branch of our way that pursued this many centuries after our founder. They initiated belief in the gods, spirits, temples and rituals and some made it their chief aim to cure the disease.”

“I see, so they renounced the ways of their founder and began a new path.”

“On the contrary, they venerated the founder and claimed to continue his work.”

“Were they successful with a cure?”

“It isn’t clear, but I think not. You can read about it in their writings.”

The Taoist teacher led them to a room with several full bookshelves. “You can look through these to see what they tried. I can tell you ahead of time that most of their attempts did not succeed. Unfortunately, many of these are not in your language.”

The hearts of the pilgrims sank as their eyes scanned the large number of books. “Tell us sir, what about today? I don’t believe I have heard of your kind bringing the medicine as far as our village.”

“You won’t. That was all going on centuries ago. No one pursues a cure anymore. In recent times, our membership has dwindled.”

When the pilgrims were by themselves, Jane said, “While it is possible that in all those books an answer is hiding, I think the chances are not good. Our time would be better spent looking elsewhere.” The other two agreed.

The three travelers left that portion of the valley and entered another section of old villages. As they were questioning the locals, someone told them, “I can tell you where to find what you seek.” He directed them to a particular street where a scholar lived.

The scholar began. "The people on this street are followers of Zoroastrianism. Our founder was a prophet who lived very long ago. He informed us of the one true God and told us how to be cured of the disease."

"So you have a medicine then?"

"Yes."

"And the medicine comes from God?"

"Yes, the medicine is from him."

"This is new. The other treatments we have studied thus far either described many gods or ignored him completely, while yours teaches one God who supplies the cure. Please describe it."

"If you worship our god and live a moral life, you will go to a paradise after you die. It is explained in our books."

"You have books? Not too many we hope."

"Not to worry; there are only a few."

"We have searched much of this valley, and yours is the first treatment with promise. Tell us; is your kind spread all over the valley?"

"Besides this street, you will find a street with our people in a couple other villages."

"Why is that? Your medicine has such potential."

"I'm not sure. We've been around three thousand years, but our numbers are much smaller than they were in ancient times. And, we make no effort to spread the knowledge of the cure."

"What are the proofs that your cure works?"

"Our prophet gave us the cure from God."

"We understand; but what evidence is there that he was a true prophet and that the cure is tested? Tell us about his life."

"Not much is known; we are not even sure what millennium he lived in."

"Did he write the books you spoke of?"

"No. His message was passed on by word of mouth for over a thousand years before it was finally written down."

"Upon hearing this, the faces of the three pilgrims fell."

"Then tell us; were there other men who can validate his story, proving that his cure came from God?"

"No. He is our only source."

John said passionately, "Please, sir, listen to me. Even now my parents are bedridden back in our home town of Villa, as the disease takes its deadly toll. Before I bring medicine back to them, I must be sure it will work because I may not get a second chance. Is there nothing else you can say to give us more confidence in your treatment?"

“We have faith in our prophet and his message. That is our proof.”  
Out on the street the pilgrims conferred and elected to move on.



- Mary Is it true Confucianism makes no promises about life after the grave?
- Jose That is what I've read. It doesn't even talk about it. Confucianism tells people how to live better lives, that's all.
- David I've read that too. It has served the Orientals well, but it's of no interest to us. Does anyone want to discuss it further? (No one did.)
- David Then on to Taoism, also born and raised in China.
- Geoff The story was right in describing early Taoism as primarily a philosophy of life, not a religious belief. But I like some of the ideas and have tried using them.
- Liz That's fine, but we are looking for something else.
- Geoff Maybe some Taoist concepts can help.
- Elliot Why? He didn't promise immortality and he gave us no reason to think he understands the secrets of the universe anymore than you or I. I'm not going to follow someone just because he writes cool poetry.
- Karl A later form of Taoism specifically went after immortality. What do people think? Did they find it?
- Tyler According to the story, you'd have to read a lot of books to find out.
- Anna If the answer is there, it's worth it. Remember the sacrifice story?
- Barb She's right. It will come down to whether we vote to detour there, or keep going like the pilgrims did.
- Sandra Where do we think our best chances are, in Taoism or in the religions still to come?
- David Nothing we decide now is final. Think of this as the initial interview. We can always circle back later. Maybe the book will do that.
- Cooper Taoism's search for immortality died out in the Middle Ages. If they found a fountain of youth, why has it been forgotten?
- Latisha Maybe it was lost and is waiting to be rediscovered.

Paul That sounds romantic, but we can't afford to think like a Hollywood movie. If the Taoists gave up on their search for immortality, that is a big clue.

David If there are no more comments on that subject, let's go to Zoroastrianism.

Owen That was interesting. The message had promise, but the proof was thin ice.

Liz No ice at all. Can you imagine putting your trust in a message passed on orally for over a thousand years?

Anna It explains why their faith never spread, but instead shrunk. The pilgrims made an issue of the fact that he was the only prophet. Does that really matter?

A man spoke up from the crowd.

Man I speak from my experience as a trial lawyer that it makes a huge difference in proving a point to a jury. One person may deliberately or unknowingly misrepresent the facts, but the chance that a second person will misrepresent the facts with the same details is far less. Add more witnesses, and the chance of them all doing it approaches zero.

Tyler It's not uncommon to have whole groups deceived.

Man Those aren't witnesses. They were told something, maybe a rumor or a superstition, and chose to believe it. A witness describes what he or she experienced firsthand.

Mary Even if we were willing to trust this one guy, I'd like to have a little more to go on than his saying God spoke to him. A lot of people make that claim.

Paul I'd be willing to bet there are stories of miracles associated with the founder of Zoroastrianism because that happens with most prophets. Myths grow up around them in the centuries after their death. It can be difficult separating eyewitness reports from rumors. In this case, it isn't hard because this fellow has no eyewitness accounts.

David It seems our discussion is over. Let's vote.

Latisha How can you take a meaningful vote on three whole religions when you know almost nothing about their traditions, literature, and people?

David I understand this may seem too fast, but other people are screaming that we're moving too slowly. We aren't interested in the details of their traditions. Remember the story of the two women in the

burning building? All we care about are two things. What do they promise for eternal life, and what proofs do they offer that they can deliver the goods. Right, Hank?

Hank That's right. If the necklace gang doesn't think they can deliver the goods, it's thumbs down. By the way, if any of you think the disease is only in the story, come over after the meeting and I'll bore you with the details of my latest operation.

Elliot Can we vote by written ballot? Someone may be swayed when they see most of the hands going up one way.

David Good point. I'll get some paper and pens.

As David was returning from his house, two policemen walked into the backyard asking to see the owner of the house.

David That's me. Is there a problem?

Police There have been complaints from neighbors about you using that lot next door for parking.

David I thought I was doing the neighbors a favor by getting cars off the street.

Police Come down to city hall Monday morning and see if they can work something out. Otherwise, you'll have to move your meetings elsewhere.

As they were talking, Geoff was sitting in the front row staring at the ground and holding one hand over his forehead.

Police Geoff, is that you? I didn't notice you at first.

Geoff Hi, Tony.

Police What are you doing here?

Geoff Just some undercover work, heh, heh.

After the policemen left, David prepared three stones, distributed eleven ballots to the covenant members, and collected the votes. Everyone voted no on Confucianism. Two voted yes for Taoism. One voted yes for Zoroastrianism. David took the three stones and put them on the "Set Aside Religions" pillar, on top of the "Indigenous Religions" stone.

David Sunday we will be going door-to-door again, for whoever is interested. See you Monday, if we're still here.

On Sunday afternoon, Paul and Elliot arrived to go knock on doors with David. He filled them in on the method, and they drove to a different part of town than last time.

They knocked on the first door and a middle-aged woman answered. They asked her opinion about eternal life, and she told them about a book she had read. “It shows what God is like, how he loves every one of us the same. He has so many good things in store for all of us. It gives me a lot of hope.”

Paul asked, “How do you know this author is telling you the truth about God?”

“I know he’s right because I like what he’s saying, and it makes me feel good.”

The three looked at each other and decided not to ask any more questions.

The next home was owned by a man David’s age. “I suppose when I get older I might take up that question. I’m having too much fun now. I’ve got my cabin, my buddies, my wide screen TV. I’m feeling no pain. If there’s a God, he can wait.”

David recalled Cedar Ridge. “Do you ever wonder if your life might be suddenly cut short, and you’ll never get the chance?”

“Why would I think about something depressing like that? I’m squeezing all the gusto out of life that I can.”

Walking down the sidewalk, Elliot said, “I think someone’s been getting his philosophy of life from commercials.”

At the next house a young man answered with, “It’s interesting you should ask that. I’ve been learning a lot about religions lately.”

“Is that so,” Paul said. “Where have you been learning it?”

“Documentaries on TV.”

“Are you sure they’re giving an unbiased presentation?”

“They wouldn’t put it on TV if it weren’t true.”

A woman at the next house replied, “I respect everyone’s religious beliefs.”

David suggested, “Come join our discussions, and you can share your views.”

“I would never want to tell anyone what to believe.”

“We want to hear many perspectives, to keep us from fooling ourselves.”

“I don’t have the time, but I wouldn’t worry about your conclusions. Whatever you decide will be good, and I’ll respect it.”

At the next house a man answered, “Yes, I’ve been thinking about that subject lately.” They told him about the meetings. “You mean people do that? Can I come?”

“Absolutely. It’s for everyone.”

He ran and got a pen and paper to write down David’s address. “Thank you for taking your Sunday afternoons to do this. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

On the front sidewalk, David blurted, “Did that just happen?”

Paul said, “It happens, sometimes.”

# CHAPTER 7

Monday

Geoff asked to join the covenant group. David gave him a necklace, then announced, “I went to city hall this morning and got an okay to keep using the lot next door for parking. It’s story time.”



## Hinduism

The three sojourners from Villa, James and the young couple, continued their travels to a new part of the valley where they found many doctors and wise men offering a variety of medicines. They spotted a guru and asked the name of these treatments.

The guru told them, “We don’t have a name for it. It’s what we do. However, some call it Hinduism.”

“Can you explain your system and whether you can heal the disease?”

“We believe there are many cures to the disease. Ours is only one of them. Many of our people follow one God, others believe in many gods, and a few are atheists. It doesn’t matter because God is in all of us.”

“If God is inside us, why are we dying of the disease?”

“Some would say it’s because you don’t realize that life is an illusion.”

“What is this God, or gods, like?”

“Our people describe him many ways.”

“In some of the first villages we visited, they told us they appease their gods with sacrifices to obtain forgiveness for their sins.”

“We don’t follow such things. There is no sin and no need to be forgiven.”

“Then you must think the medicine of those villages is ineffective.”

“Not at all. Use those medicines. As I said, we believe there are many cures.”

“Do you believe, as they do in some villages, that God supplies the medicine for the disease?”

“No. God does not care about the disease as if he were a person like you and me. He is above that.”

“So has anyone from here ever gone to those other villages to point that out to them?”

“We would never want to tell someone else what to do. Let them be cured through their own medicine.”

“Can you tell us how your treatment was first discovered?”

“Thousands of years ago wise sages began to teach our way.”

“Do you know who they were and the history of their times?”

“No.”

“In that you are similar to the first villages we encountered.”

“Perhaps, but at least our prescription is written down.”

“That’s an improvement. Can you show it to us?”

The guru took them to a room which had a number of shelves stuffed with books. There were also piles of books stacked on the floor, even more outside the room, and some down the hall.

“What are these other books not on the shelves?”

“Those are various commentaries and traditions of men that accumulated centuries ago.”

“How do you know where the wisdom of your sages ends and the opinions of men begin?”

“The line is blurred, but this is of no concern since our system proudly tolerates all things.”

“Is there proof that your sages had special knowledge of a cure?”

“We don’t put much emphasis on proofs.”

“Then why do you still follow this practice?”

“Our people have for thousands of years. It’s our sacred tradition.”

“Why should we follow it?”

“You don’t have to, if you have your own.”

The pilgrims asked, “What is the cure like?”

“When the disease completes its lethal task, your soul goes to a newborn, carrying the results of your good and bad deeds, as Karma dictates.”

“And then?”

“When that person grows old and dies, the soul goes to yet another newborn. This process repeats indefinitely, unless those who inherit your soul accumulate enough good Karma to escape the cycle.”

James stood up in amazement. “I thought I would have to endure the disease only once. Are you telling me I have to suffer it multiple times?”

“Our treatment improves your Karma, so that after many rebirths, your soul might achieve Nirvana. But don’t worry about repeating the disease, since you won’t remember anything when you’re reborn.”

John stood up also. “If my memory is wiped clean, then I cease to exist and the disease has still achieved victory. The person who inherits my soul has some connection to me, like a son or daughter, but that person is not me. The best you can offer is that someday a person distantly connected to me may achieve paradise?”

“Yes, that is our belief, and it has been for a very long time.”

“The wicked person must love it, for it completely denies final justice. He can do all the evil he wishes, but he will never taste the consequences since it falls on his successor.”

“I haven’t yet told you about the beautiful parts of our treatment, such as the lovely artwork, hymns, prayers, and rituals.”

“They are no doubt delightful, but they are not what we are looking for.”

The pilgrims said their goodbyes and proceeded down the road, setting a course for other parts of the valley.



Anna That was . . . different.

Tyler Was it accurate?

Elliot Hinduism is the *anything goes* religion.

Mary So their scriptures are huge and the line between them and their other books is blurred.

Elliot Fits with their philosophy. A concise and well defined operating manual isn’t important.

- Cooper I'm looking at our pillars over there, and I think Hinduism goes against a couple of the stones.
- Paul One would be "Fearing God." They imagine a God, or gods, and assume the real God doesn't care. You can see why elements of Hinduism are attractive to Americans.
- Sandra Based on the religions we've covered so far, does anyone still think all religions teach the same thing?
- Jose Not me. Each one defines the key features differently: the problem, the cure, and God.
- Owen On this reincarnation thing, I'm with the pilgrims. I hear people talk about it as if it's cool, but I don't see the appeal. If my memory is wiped, I'm gone.
- Liz I agree. It's not eternal life, at least not anything worth seeking.
- Latisha I've got a teenage daughter, and I like the comparison between reincarnation and our children. Our choices can improve the lives of those who come after us.
- Geoff It's a noble sentiment, but it's not much of a hope for mankind. Death still wins.
- Anna Don't forget, no assumptions. It doesn't matter what we would like. We are trying to find the truth, and maybe reincarnation is it.
- Liz If it is, I don't think Hinduism will be the one to prove it to us. They put way more importance on tolerance than on truth.
- David Our charter is to find eternal life, and this isn't it. I say we keep looking.
- Cooper Me too.
- Barb The stories have highlighted how most religions don't care about spreading their beliefs. The book implies this is a negative, but I see it as a positive.
- Jose Why?
- Barb I don't like some proselytizer pushing his views on me.
- Paul It hinges on how you see your situation. If you're sick, you welcome a doctor. If you're well, you call it pushy. Aren't we here because we're looking for a cure?
- Barb I know what you're saying, but I still don't like it.
- Tyler Barb, I feel like you do. I hate when religion is pushed on me.
- Karl Actually, it's an excellent test of a religion. No one knows a faith like its followers. If none of them think it's worth our time, why should I disagree?

Sandra This may make your skin crawl, but the more a religion proselytizes, the more we should be interested in it.

David It does make my skin crawl, but you've got a point. Are we ready to vote on whether Hinduism offers a good chance of finding eternal life?

David collected the ballots. All but one voted no. He made a stone called "Hinduism."

As the meeting broke up, Liz and David chatted with Geoff.

"Geoff," Liz said, "those policemen last Friday recognized you. Are you a cop?"

"No, but I've been an office manager at the police station downtown for over ten years. I know most of the cops in Ashbow."

"I'm glad to hear it," David said, tongue in cheek. "I feel safer, in case hecklers show up."

The next day, Elliot made his weekly visit to the Ashbow nursing home. He sat down next to his grandfather, who was sleeping with an oxygen mask over his face. The doctor came by on his rounds. He updated Elliot on his grandfather's condition, which had gotten worse. "You're very close to your grandfather, aren't you, Elliot?"

"He and Grandma lived next door while I was growing up. Every summer he took me up north for a week of camping and fishing. Yeah, we're close."

"I bet it's hard to see him like this"

"It is. He's lived a full life, though. It's his time. But, it's made me think about my own mortality."

The doctor said, "We have a chaplain on staff here. Perhaps you would like to talk with him."

"I don't think that would do much good. I'm kind of a skeptic."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry. I've got another option I've been checking out."

## Wednesday

Anna was hoping to sit by David, but she arrived a little late and found Liz sitting right next to him. The chair on the other side of him was open. Feeling miffed, she sat somewhere else.



## Miscellaneous Religions

The three travelers journeyed on through the valley and came to a large town. It had a bazaar which attracted sages and healers from all over the valley. "This is fortunate," said the pilgrims. "We can sample the valley's ideas here, without wearing out our feet." They asked the locals, and a man steered them to a long street lined on both sides with small booths. At once the pilgrims began going from booth to booth, talking to the lone person sitting at each one.

At one booth, a disciple explained, "Many years ago, our founder discovered the cure for the disease."

"Where is your founder now?"

"He died of the disease."

"Oh. Is he the only one who made this discovery? We prefer a medicine endorsed by more than one physician."

"He is the only one, but we trust him. He was a charismatic and dynamic leader, as well as a spellbinding speaker."

"Today we have spoken to several who claim a unique cure. Do you also make that claim?"

"Yes, ours is the only cure. All others are in error, false prophets."

"What is your medicine like?"

"It requires complete devotion to our founder and his teachings."

"What proofs do you offer to persuade us that your founder unearthed what no one else has?"

"He was a very great man. Read his life story and you will be convinced."

"Do you have followers all over the valley?"

"No. Our numbers never grew large and have been shrinking ever since the days of our founder."

The pilgrims stepped away from the booth and discussed the matter. James said, "We have met so many who argue that they possess the only cure. They are right in one thing, only one of them can be correct."

Jane countered, "Maybe they are all correct but they don't know it."

"If they cannot even tell who has the correct cure, should we trust them?"

"But if only one of them is correct, could it be this fellow's prophet?"

"That seems extremely unlikely since it is one man against the world, and his proofs are no better than the others."

"I agree, especially since this prophet could not even cure himself."

As the pilgrims passed another booth, the devotee inside called out to them, "Our treatment comes from a major treatment of this valley, practiced by millions."

"Then why are you here all alone?"

"Our founder discovered that the treatment became corrupt, so he broke away on his own and reformed it."

"We have met many of your kind today. I suppose you have only one founder, who was a powerful leader, a dynamic speaker, and had a charming personality."

"You know him!"

"Out of all those who broke away from the original treatment, your founder alone is correct."

"You learn quickly."

"What is your proof that the records of the original treatment became corrupt over the years?"

"Because it disagrees with our founder's message. He alone returns us to the original message."

"How do you know your founder's cure matches the original since you claim all record of it is lost?"

"We believe our founder."

When the pilgrims left, one remarked, "This man is like the earlier one, but worse. He not only repudiates all other treatments, but he repudiates his own as well, except for his unique recipe."

They passed a booth where a man pulled back a curtain to reveal a darkened room. He said, "I can let you talk with those who have overcome the disease."

The pilgrims were encouraged. "Tell us how."

The medium explained, "We must use a room of my choosing, like this one here. The lights must be turned off. Objects will move around the room, and you will hear voices."

"Will they tell me what medicine to take to overcome the disease?"

"No, but they will give you hope that a cure exists." The medium held out his hand, "There is a fee, payable ahead of time."

"Let us go," said the older pilgrim. When they were away from the booth, he said, "That is a con man."

As the sun was setting, they neared the end of the street and spotted a man sitting on a bench. They asked if he had come seeking medicine for the disease.

The self-healer told them, "I have already found a cure."

"Where did you find it?"

"I combined ingredients from many sources, creating my own custom blend. I borrowed from science, philosophy, medicine, religion, psychology, the occult, nature, magic, spiritual masters, and vegetarianism."

"How can you justify not using the entire recipe from each of these disciplines, but only a small portion of it?"

"I pick what suits my tastes."

"How do you know it will work?"

"It makes sense to me."

"We have talked with others who fashioned a homemade cure that made sense to them, but theirs were very different from yours."

"I would assume those cures will also work."

As they left this man, John said, "I would never trust such a man to prescribe medicine for me."



David We've got several topics tonight. Who wants to decipher the first portion?

Cooper That appeared to be small religions that never got very far. Some are still around, some died out centuries ago, new ones are forming as we speak.

Liz How many are there?

Cooper Hundreds. Some only win a handful of converts.

Geoff Is it true they are started by one person?

Paul Almost all of them.

David That is a real weak point. Putting your hope on one person seems like a big gamble. Especially when they are saying theirs is the only right path.

Owen How many really say that?

Paul A lot. Others like to say everyone is right.

Latisha Why do we keep focusing on differences between religions?

Jose Because we want the truth. One says we will be reincarnated and one says we won't. Are those minor differences?

Latisha They aren't minor, but maybe we can reconcile them.

Cooper You must be paralyzed by true/false questions.

David Keep it civil, Cooper.

Cooper Sorry.

Mary Latisha, you are a compassionate woman, and you expect the best from everyone. But if you won't accept that people could ever make a big mistake, you aren't helping them, you're enabling them.

Latisha I see your point, but I don't know if I could ever believe that so many people are following a lie.

Anna How do we know that one of these lone ranger prophets didn't hit upon the cure?

Elliot We don't know, but the odds are very slim.

Anna I don't know anything about them, so how do I know the odds?

David Check their reviews. They stayed small or died out. Those who were close to it have voted.

Liz I think the next part of the story was about splinter groups who break off from one of the major religions.

Sandra There have been a lot of those also, and it happens with every major religion. These have much in common with the small religions we just talked about.

Tyler Like basing everything on one person.

Paul They insist everyone in their own faith is doing it wrong, except them. They never produce evidence that the faith became corrupt as they insist. Their main weapon is piling up words and stories with lots of bluster. Amazingly, some fall for it.

Karl A few of these splinter groups grew very large and are still around.

Liz Then there are others who didn't make a clean break, but created a slightly modified version of their mother faith. It's created a multi-headed beast, messy and confusing.

Karl So which version is correct?

David I agree with Paul. The splinters have a tough case to make, and only one of them could be right. I think you have to start with the mother faiths and work forward. Should we go on to the next topic, which was . . . ?

Barb Spiritism, or talking to your dead Aunt Norma. Does anyone think it's a con?

Elliot Yes.

Geoff We can't be sure.

Anna We aren't going to answer that question here. Is it a path to eternal life?

Jose No. At best it might show us there's something on the other side, but it doesn't show us how to get there.

Latisha What do you mean how to get there? You die and you're there.

David That's leaving way too much to guesswork, hoping everyone goes to the same place. The whole purpose of this search is to discover as much as we can ahead of time. Spiritism doesn't tell us which path to take.

Geoff Then there's the last topic, customized religions.

Mary It's like creating your own new religion, with a membership of one.

Anna And you are the founder and prophet.

Sandra Does that work? Can you assemble your own belief system by borrowing from this and that?

Karl I see its appeal. Build what you like. But it can't succeed. Truth is truth; you can't pick what's true based on your tastes.

Paul How common do you think this is?

Elliot We saw some of that last Sunday, when we went door-to-door.

Paul I'd like to suggest that everyone sitting in this backyard is guilty of this to some extent. If I questioned all forty of you on your beliefs, I'd get forty versions, even from those who profess the same religion. Why? Because we pick and choose, like the man in the story. We know we can't all be right, so we assume others must be a bit off, but we must have it right, exactly what every founder of a splinter religion tells himself.

Barb I don't know about that.

Anna I think he's right, if we're honest about it.

David He is right. Paul, you have a knack for cutting to the heart of the matter. Elliot's right, we saw this on the Sunday visits, but we do it too. We hand pick our truths, and deep inside are convinced we did it better than the next guy. That's arrogant.

Jose Are you saying we are all wrong?

Paul No. But finding the truth takes hard work and you get there through humility, avoiding presumption, fearing deception, and so on.

Mary We've been through those, but now they're making more sense.

Owen No custom paths to eternal life.

David That's perfect, Owen. There is one truth, and we are all trying to meet there because our fantasies won't get us anywhere. The truth may be that there are fifteen paths to eternal life, but it remains one truth, meaning there aren't fourteen or sixteen.

Karl I like it. Right now we are spread all over the place in our make-believe worlds. Let's meet at the truth.

David We've got minor, splinter, spiritist, and custom religions. Does anyone object to voting on all these topics at once?

No one did, so David wrote on a card "Miscellaneous Religions."

David We are voting on whether we see anything in these to pursue in more depth at this time.

David took the ballots. One person voted yes and the other eleven voted no.

After the meeting, as people were visiting, David asked Sandra, "You've gotten to know Mary. How is she doing?"

"Not well. She just told me her prognosis got worse. At least her attitude is still good." Just then Cooper and Jose got into another shouting match. When they saw David starting toward them, they walked to the front yard, still arguing.

Sandra mentioned, "Those two don't get along very well."

David looked around and said, "At least the rest of the group enjoys each other. It's been fun seeing how people stay afterward to socialize." As David watched the crowd, he noticed Paul standing by himself, looking a little awkward.

The next day, David scurried across the lawn in front of the Student Union at Vanberth. His mentor, Evelyn, caught him from behind. "David. In a hurry are we?"

"Evelyn. Wasn't the last time we had a chance to visit the first day of the semester?"

"It was," Evelyn said. "I've been wanting to ask you about the meetings at your house. People have been talking about it."

David stopped walking. "Who?"

"People at school and around town."

"What are they saying?"

"You know how people are. You must admit, it's unique. How's it been going?"

“It’s been the most unique experience of my life, and I’ve got a feeling the ride may only get wilder.”

“You sound worried.”

“I’m worried I might disappoint those who are coming.” David decided not to mention Mary’s cancer. She wouldn’t want that to get out, especially with people talking.

“Why do think it’s on your shoulders?”

“You’re right, it’s not. I’ve also met a girl there.”

Evelyn perked up. “Wonderful! Tell me about her.”

“There’s not much to say; we’re just friends now. I haven’t even asked her on a date yet, but if my dad knew, he’d be thrilled. This may turn out to be a big year for me, in more ways than one.”

“Have you talked to your dad about your group?”

“No. Only my cousin knows; I think. My relatives are Jewish, but they aren’t spiritually minded. When I was growing up, they never mentioned religion except to spout something negative about Christians. It didn’t leave me with a favorable impression. Do you know I have never once set foot inside a church?”

“Is that so? Not even for a wedding?”

“My relatives don’t get married in churches.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t worry about negative feelings toward the church. You aren’t alone.”

## Friday

As the meeting started, Latisha asked to join the covenant, and she was given a necklace.



## Buddhism

The determined pilgrims trekked across the broad valley. They came upon a man meditating in a temple, so they stopped to converse with him. “We have seen men and women like you in many villages throughout this part of the valley. Tell us about yourself?”

The monk said, "I am a Buddhist. Our founder broke away from Hinduism centuries ago because it had many errors which he needed to correct."

"That sounds familiar. Were you praying to God when we came in?"

"I was praying, but not to God, since he doesn't exist."

"We met a Buddhist in another village who believed in a god."

"Yes, some Buddhists do, and they pray to him. My brand of Buddhism believes there is no creator, no commandments, no sin, no forgiveness, no reward or punishment from God."

"Some of the other peddlers of cures believe in all of these. You must deem them quacks and charlatans."

"Not at all. We pride ourselves on tolerance and recommend those peddlers as worthy providers of a cure."

"Tell us about your cure," the three asked.

"Through hours of meditation and other practices, you eventually break free from desires, attachments, and the illusion that you are a permanent individual."

"Becoming permanent is the very prize we are searching for."

"This is part of your problem. Our medicine will help you see the truth."

"What truth is that?"

"When the disease completes its course, and you die, what you thought was your soul will cease to exist. Something from you will transmigrate to be born in another. Our medicine can eventually stop these rebirths and the suffering they cause."

"You mean my soul will be reborn?"

"No, because you have no soul. Our founder taught this."

"How did your founder learn this?"

"He was meditating under a tree for a long time, after which he received enlightenment."

"Did this enlightenment come from God, like many other healers claim?"

"Certainly not. Our founder believed God to be irrelevant. Other Buddhists disagree, but we are flexible."

James inquired, "Did your founder perform any miracles?"

"He considered miracles unimportant. In later generations, stories of a few miracles were attributed to him, but that is not the proof of our medicine."

"What is?"

“The proof is that it works. For example, it has made me more self-controlled, patient and compassionate. My peace and happiness have increased.”

“Your medicine only relieves the symptoms, making us comfortable while the disease erodes our life. I was hoping it would defeat the disease.”

“On the contrary, our treatment will help you see that the desire to live forever is misguided.”

The three sojourners thanked the Buddhist and decided to move on. As they set out for the next town, Jane confessed, “I’m not sure I want to keep doing this. Talking with these fellows is wearying, and they’re all starting to sound alike. It would be much easier to believe that all cures work, or that none work. Then we could go home.”

James and John encouraged her. “We are not doing this for our enjoyment. Have you forgotten what’s at stake? Our very lives and those of our loved ones.”

Jane agreed, “You are right. Let’s press on.”



Elliot This hyper-tolerance thing, do Buddhists and Hindus really think that way?

Owen What do you mean?

Elliot You can believe whatever you want. It all works; it’s all true.

Jose I’ve heard Americans talk like that, mainly when discussing religion and philosophy. They quickly abandon that nonsense when results are needed, like getting the car fixed. Why is that?

David People don’t take spiritual truths seriously. It’s almost like a game to them.

Mary It’s not a game to me.

Sandra Anyone still think all religions teach the same thing?

Geoff We get it, Sandra. People acknowledge the fundamental differences between faiths, but they act like it doesn’t matter.

Anna Believe anything you want, and it’ll all work out in the end.

Cooper Would anyone see a doctor with that philosophy?

Karl Buddhism is one of those splinter religions we talked about last time. It was started by one person, and it offers little to prove it has

the truth. Yet Buddhism has grown over much of Asia. Why were they successful when others were not?

Barb We have used a lack of numbers as a reason to skip past other religions. That's not the case here.

David Good point, Barb. Buddhism spread to a number of countries in Asia. What did they see in it? I've been reading about Buddhism and I'm having a hard time seeing its upside. There's no promise of immortality; in fact, they teach against it.

Cooper I believe some later strands of Buddhism teach paradise after death.

Paul Who started those strands? One more prophet saying, "I got it right, and all the Buddhists before me were mistaken." He has no proof. He says, "Just trust me."

Liz Barb did have a good point. If so many practice it, maybe there is something we are missing.

Owen Like what? A lot of us have been reading about these religions. Can anyone suggest what we're overlooking?

Anna They lack the two things we want: promise of immortality and proof that they know something the common man doesn't. When they say it doesn't matter what you believe about God, that doesn't fill me with confidence in the rest of their teaching.

David If we're done, let's vote. A yes vote means we will detour into Buddhism in depth. A no vote means we continue with the book.

While people thought about their choice, David made a marble stone with the label "Buddhism."

David Time to vote. There are now thirteen in the covenant. (David pulled out a calculator) We need four yes votes to stay with Buddhism. David collected the ballots and read the results. Voting yes were Liz, Barb and Latisha. The other ten voted no.

Liz This is discouraging. Why are we doing this if we keep passing by one religion after another?

David Most of us feel we haven't found a viable candidate yet.

Liz These candidates are the religions followed by most of the world!

David Most of the world isn't looking for the same thing we are.

Afterward, Karl pulled David aside. "You remember when you first told me about doing this, and I was concerned about some people's reactions?"

"Yes," David said. "Why are you bringing that up now? Do you think someone is here to sabotage us?"

"It's only intuition. I'm probably wrong."

## CHAPTER 8

The following day, on Saturday evening, a man walked up the sidewalk of a house in an upscale part of Ashbow. He knocked on a solid mahogany door. An elderly gentleman answered.

“Mr. Peterson?” the man asked.

“Yes, come in,” Mr. Peterson said. They settled into a pair of comfortable chairs in the den. “May I get you something?”

“No thank you.”

“I understand my friend Arlan sent you.”

“That’s right. Thank you for seeing me. You come highly recommended. I hope you can give me some advice.”

“What do you want?”

“Do you know about the meetings at David Ruben’s house?”

“Of course,” Peterson said.

“Are you concerned about them?”

“It depends which way they go. Have you been attending?”

“I have,” said the man, “They get forty people three nights a week, and the numbers are growing.”

“Let me guess. You are worried this may flare into religious fanaticism. I understand they are reviewing religions now, and going through them quickly.”

“How do you know that?”

“I have my sources. What do you want from me?”

“I need help presenting my side. I was told that’s your specialty.”

“I’ve debated a few zealots in my day. I see you brought a notepad. Have they talked about miracles yet?”

“Yes. They say to avoid anti-supernatural bias.”

“How quaint,” chuckled Peterson. “Miracles are easy to refute by proposing hallucination, group conspiracy, exaggeration or just plain lying. People believe in these much more easily. And remind them that everyone knows nature never breaks its own rules.”

“They won’t let me get by with ‘everyone knows.’ ”

“They’re more on the ball than I gave them credit for. Then say something like, ‘All scientists agree.’ And, you can always accuse the witness of being mistaken.”

“What if I can’t prove that?”

“Doesn’t matter. The ones with any inclination to disbelieve miracles will assume he must be.”

“Good idea.”

“Another ploy is to predict that someday future scientific discoveries will explain the event.”

The man said, “That’s a good one because it’s impossible to refute.”

“You catch on quickly. Most of these things ride on the words of some holy man. You appeal to the prejudice that these prophets routinely stretch the truth and have a self serving motive. It always warms my heart when a fake is exposed. They make it easier to condemn all religious zealots.”

“And don’t forget the argument from silence. Use it to make someone say anything you want. It’s like a blank check. For example, when you came into my house, you never said you were married. I could argue that you would never fail to mention something so important, so this proves you are not married. Is it true?”

“Uh, yes.”

Peterson laughed. “Sometimes you get lucky.”

“What if I get in trouble and appear to be losing the argument?”

“You never want to give the appearance of losing the argument. Use a smear campaign. Throw everything you’ve got at them but don’t go into any depth. The listeners will be convinced that some of it must be true only because of the quantity of accusations. If all else fails, tell them truth is relative.

“So I say, ‘Truth is relative’?”

“No. That’s too obvious. Disguise it with phrases like, ‘Let’s find common ground between these contradictory facts,’ or ‘Though we disagree, I’m glad for you,’ or ‘This is religion, not history.’ That’s enough for tonight, but do come back if you want more tutoring.”

Mr. Peterson led him to the entryway and opened the door. “How rude of me; I never asked your name.”

“Tyler is my name, sir.”

## Monday

When the meeting started, Tyler said, “I would like to join the covenant.” David pulled out a necklace and handed it to him with a big smile and a handshake. “Welcome to the covenant. We look forward to your contributions.”

After that, a woman spoke up from the back row. “Your expressed purpose is to find a way to eternal life. Don’t you think this will become a self fulfilling prophecy? You will convince yourselves of what you want to believe, just like people in all religions.”

Someone yelled, “You must be new here. These guys are anything but easy. They toss out religions so fast it makes your head spin.”



## Islam

The three pilgrims from Villa came to a land they had not previously set foot in. It was a dry region where village after village offered the same medicine. They noticed a man prostrating himself in prayer. When he finished, they asked him to explain his treatment of the disease.

The Imam said, “I practice Islam, and our cure comes from the one all powerful God who is just and merciful.”

“That is very different from most of what we’ve been hearing. What does the cure look like?”

“At the end of your life, your deeds are judged and you are sent to reward or punishment. Our cure tells you how to increase your chances of the reward, which will be an eternal paradise without suffering or death.”

“That is encouraging. Are you like so many who say any medicine will heal?”

“No. Ours is the best medicine. A couple of others may work, and the rest do nothing.”

“Is the prescription well documented?”

“Absolutely! Here is our book that tells you everything you need to know. This, and the traditions, what we call the Hadith.”

“How many use your cure?”

“We are in many villages, and our numbers continue to grow.”

John and his wife were very excited and whispered to each other, “This shows the most promise so far.” However, James reserved judgment and continued, “What is the origin of your cure?”

“Long ago God sent prophets to many villages, but the message got corrupted over time. To correct those errors and restore the truth, God sent our prophet, peace be upon him.”

John’s smile disappeared.

James asked, “Is it true that your cure hangs entirely upon one man, your prophet?”

“Yes. He was a very great man. We trust him completely.”

Jane’s smile also left her face.

The Imam offered, “I should add that the holy books of other healers point to our founder.”

“Don’t you accuse those book of being unreliable? How can you appeal to them as faithful witnesses?”

“A small part of them is reliable.”

“Which part?”

“The part that agrees with our founder.”

“But most of what they say you dismiss.”

“Yes, because they are corrupt, proven by the fact that they disagree with our founder.”

James said, “We’ve met dozens of men who make your same claim of repairing previous revelation. True, you have more followers than most all of them, but we must ask why should we believe your founder instead of them?”

“Our greatest proof is our holy book. If you read it you will become convinced in your heart of its divine origin, but only if you read it in the original language, which unfortunately you don’t know.”

“People all over the valley are convinced that their holy book seems divine. We prefer hard facts over a warm feeling.”

“If you wish. This book, written long ago, contains many scientific facts only recently discovered by men.”

“Is it possible those scientific facts are *read into* the text?”

“No, they are plainly there.”

“If they are plain, then why has no one predicted any scientific discovery using your book? Instead, these facts are only *found* in your book after science first discovers them.”

“There are also mathematical miracles in our book, such as the number of times a word is used.”

“Any large book has millions of numerical combinations, making it easy to find some that appear miraculous. This is a simple sleight-of-hand trick.”

“If you still require proof, there are the miracles and predictions of our founder. We don’t like to depend on those, but we will appeal to them if you insist.”

“I’ve been told that almost all of the miracles and predictions attributed to your founder are found in your traditions, the Hadith, and not in your main book.”

“This is true.”

“Suppose in a murder trial the prosecution brings in one hundred witnesses. The judge quickly discredits ninety-eight of them. The remaining two are not eyewitnesses to the murder, but only have third-hand hearsay evidence. In other words, someone told someone who told someone who told these two. Will the judge convict this man of murder?”

“Perhaps not.”

“This is what you are asking us to put our faith in. Before being written down, your Hadith were passed down orally from one man to another for two hundred years, after which compilers threw out all but a tiny percent.”

When the pilgrims were alone, Jane said, “Although their numbers are large, their founder resembles the many lone prophets and reformers we’ve already encountered.” John added, “They claim to cure the disease, but cannot cite one documented case where they have already done it.”



Latisha This one has a legitimate promise of eternal life.

David The classic, western view of heaven and hell.

Liz It’s got the promise, but not the proof.

Elliot Just because everything hangs on the word of one person, Muhammad, does that make him wrong?

Paul Of course it doesn’t, but it hangs the destiny of the world all on one thread. Why him out of the hundreds of others also claiming to be the one, true prophet?

- Jose He is different from most of the others because Islam has a huge number of believers. And to their credit, they do try to spread their faith.
- Barb Jose has a point. A lot of people have voted yes for Islam. If we make a short list based on this criteria, it would be: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity.
- Karl Those are mutually exclusive, so you'd have to pick one of the four.
- Anna I agree with Paul. I want more than one guy saying, "Trust me, I'm the one."
- Elliot Doesn't Muhammad claim to be the last in a long line of prophets? So is he really standing alone?
- David He is. The prophets who came before him, Hebrew or otherwise, directly contradict Muhammad and his message. He gets around this by saying they were corrupted, although there's no documented proof of that. He says the evidence that they once agreed with him has unfortunately been lost. You'll just have to take his word for it.
- Anna What about other proofs?
- Tyler It's common knowledge that these prophets routinely stretch the truth and have a self serving motive.
- Elliot That isn't common knowledge.
- Tyler Well, truth is relative. Uh, what I mean is, let's find common ground between these contradictory facts.
- Sandra Tyler, what in the world are you talking about?
- Tyler Never mind.
- Mary Let's go to the miracles. How many are in the Quran?
- Geoff Try searching the Quran for stories of Muhammad's miracles. You'll be searching a long time. The miracle stories are in what they call the Hadith, or traditions.
- David Has anyone studied this?
- Cooper I have. The story was correct in showing that the Hadith aren't very trustworthy since Muslims themselves eventually threw out almost all of them.
- Owen To be fair to the Muslims, they don't appeal to Muhammad's miracles as a main proof. Their greatest proof is the Quran itself.
- Latisha What about the Quran proves it's special?
- Owen The proofs are subjective: it's an impressive piece of literature with sublime poetry, it has a profound and relevant message, it's been well preserved, and it was written by an illiterate man. I've been

told, “Read it, and you will be convinced this must be the truth.”  
But, you’ll have to learn Arabic first, since Muslims don’t consider any translation to be the Quran.

Sandra Many faiths use that as their main proof, apparently since they don’t have anything better.

Erik was a newcomer who had only been listening until now.

Erik Is there a Muslim in the crowd who can answer a question?

Muslim I am a Muslim. I will try.

Erik I’m interested in Islam. If I fulfill the duties of a good Muslim, then I’m guaranteed entrance into paradise, correct?

Muslim You cannot say you are guaranteed paradise, but your chances will be very good.

Erik I don’t understand. Doesn’t your faith tell you God’s requirements to enter heaven?

Muslim Certainly, but men should not presume to know Allah’s final decision. We will only know for sure on the Day of Judgment.

Erik Even my high school teachers promised me that if I did the work, then I would graduate. I trusted them to keep their promise, and they kept it. Doesn’t your God make promises?

Muslim Allah is not like your teachers or any man. He is transcendent.

David If we are done discussing, let’s vote on the question. Should we study Islam in detail?

The ballots were collected, and David read the results. Three voted yes, the other eleven voted no. David placed an “Islam” stone on top of the “Set Aside Religions” pillar.

The following morning, Hank was lounging at the Ashbow senior center, when he struck up a conversation with an acquaintance. She asked him what was new, so he told her about David’s group. As soon as he mentioned the words eternal life, this woman launched into a lengthy lecture on nutrition. She brought up every natural food she had ever heard of. When she paused, Hank jumped in. “We aren’t looking for a way to extend old age. We’ve set our sights a little higher.”

“Aren’t you enjoying your retirement years?” she asked.

“It doesn’t have much of a future.”

“I suppose not, but we’ve still got our memories. Isn’t that enough?”

Hank turned around and wandered off mumbling to himself.

## Wednesday

At the time of the meeting, a heavy rain was falling. The crowd was down, but all the covenant members were there. No one wanted to miss what came next.

Before they started, someone from the crowd complained. “You are barely skimming the surface of these religions. Every one of them has volumes and volumes written about them that you are ignoring.”

A covenant member replied, “Those are opinions of men. We’re focused on what the founders of the religion taught.”



## Jainism, Sikhism, Baha’i

The three weary travelers, still searching for a cure, doubled back through a part of the valley they had visited earlier. They saw a man coming out of a temple. “Please tell us about your medicine, sir.”

The monk said, “I practice Jainism. We splintered from Hinduism long ago, when our first sages realized some changes were needed.”

“Just like the Buddhists did. Like them, do you believe we have no eternal soul?”

“No. We do have a soul.”

“What is your cure like?”

“We follow non-violence, asceticism, an ethical code, and so on.”

“Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“Yes. The goal of our medicine is to eventually escape the cycle of repeated rebirths and achieve our true divine nature.”

“Does God direct you through this process?”

“There is no God. Each person must work out his or her cure. Also, there was never any creation, nor will there be an end of the world.”

“Did you know that on every point you disagree with at least one of the medicines we’ve already examined?”

“Does that matter?”

“Do you take the knowledge of your cure to other villages?”

“No. They have their own cure.”

“The first sages you mentioned, what convinced people that their message was true?”

“Their message seemed profound, and it made sense to them.”  
The three thanked him and departed.

Down the road they saw a worshiper coming out of a different temple. When they questioned him, he said, “I am a Sikh. Our founder lived a few centuries ago. He combined ideas from Islam, such as the existence of one God, and from Hinduism, such as reincarnation and Karma.”

“Where did your founder get his information?”

“He was a prophet and received it from God.”

“What is your cure like?”

“Devotion to God and practicing our teachings.”

“Since your message agrees with neither Muslim nor Hindu nor Jain, you must tell them to abandon their treatment and convert to yours.”

“No. We are tolerant. We teach the brotherhood of all men and encourage each one to seek a cure according to the traditions of his people.”

“The Jain man does not devote himself to God, since he’s an atheist. The Muslim man does not prepare himself for reincarnation, since he expects resurrection. What would you tell them?”

“That is their business. Our treatment is for Sikhs, but we are sure it works.”

“Because of your founder?”

“Yes. He was a very great man. We trust him.”

With this, the pilgrims went on their way.

From there the pilgrims trekked to the center of the valley. Along the side of the road they saw a man studying a book. “Will you tell us if this discusses a treatment for the disease?”

The adherent told them, “Yes it does. I am a Baha’i. We believe in one God and teach that if you follow him, you will be nearer to him after you die.”

“What is that like?”

“It’s a spiritual existence, with no body or physical place. Beyond that, we don’t know much about it.”

“How long have you been around?”

“Our founder lived not too long ago. He started a new treatment, although it isn’t really new.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our founder taught that God has been sending prophets for thousands of years through many religions, and Baha’i is the latest of these.”

“Do you believe that all religions were established by God, including the atheistic ones?”

“Yes.”

The three pilgrims were completely astonished. John said, “Sir, we have walked the entire valley, and our findings compel us overwhelmingly to come to the opposite conclusion. If there is a God, he most certainly did not found all the world’s religions.”

The adherent countered, “It may seem as if they contradict each other, but they can be harmonized as follows. Some religions became corrupted over time, and some religions were appropriate only for ancient times. Some differences are explained by creative interpretations, and some are dismissed by focusing only on similarities. We promote the oneness of mankind and universal peace.”

James told him, “In your pursuit of peace, you have thrust the pursuit of truth behind your back. Therefore, you will not find peace. Now, if you will excuse us, we must go to a place very near here, which we have not yet visited. Perhaps true peace can be found there.”



Karl Not much new in that story.

Sandra You’ll probably tar and feather me for saying this, but I can’t help it. Does anyone still think all religions teach the same thing?

Jose Sandra. We get it. We get it!

Cooper You must love that last group, Latisha.

Latisha Back off, Cooper. I am not a Baha’i.

David Calm down class, I mean group.

Liz We have a splinter from Hinduism; a religion that’s part Hindu, part Muslim; and one that says all religions are okay or once were.

Owen And for the afterlife we have reincarnation with no God, reincarnation with one God, and a shadowy spiritual existence.

Paul Go ahead, pick one.

Mary Nothing stands out.

David Remember when the pilgrims were on the street with the splinter groups, most of them started by one guy? These three would be right at home on that street. The sole reason they are commonly listed with the world religions is their larger membership.

- Paul How many agree with this: Most of the world's religions were not started by prophets sent by God, but by false prophets with their own ideas. Whether they were intentionally devious or sincerely trying to help, well never know.
- Elliot I've always thought religions were man-made. You've got my vote.
- Tyler Mine too.
- Paul Does anyone disagree?
- Karl It seems extreme to accuse so many of practicing a false religion. Could the world be that deceived? But, the facts point to your conclusion, Paul. It seems most people don't want to face it.
- Anna The facts imply that all faiths can't be right, but I'd be afraid to say that in public. I'd be branded as hateful.
- David That sounds like we live in a police state. We're afraid to disagree with the party line.
- Geoff Maybe that's why the Baha'i faith is attractive. It fits perfectly with the party line, which is: Everybody is mostly right.
- Paul Is there anyone left who disagrees with me? Were most religions man-made?
- Latisha I'm not ready to agree.
- David There seems to be no more comments, so let's vote. I imagine everybody is getting tired of listening to the rain pounding on the tent.
- David distributed three sets of ballots. Jainism got no votes, Sikhism got one vote, and Baha'i got two votes. David made three stones. To date, they had built these four pillars.

#### PILLAR 1 *Attitudes*

Will to Live

Humility

Sacrifice

Assumptions

Finding Truth

Deception

Trust

Searching

#### PILLAR 2 *Non-religious Paths*

Futile Remedies

Incomplete Sources of Truth

PILLAR 3 *Religious Attitudes*

Anti-religious Bias  
Anti-supernatural Bias  
Morality  
Fearing God  
Comparing religions

PILLAR 4 *Set Aside Religions*

Indigenous Religions  
Confucianism  
Taoism  
Zoroastrianism  
Hinduism  
Miscellaneous Religions  
Buddhism  
Islam  
Jainism  
Sikhism  
Baha'i

After the meeting, several were speculating on what the book would do next. "By my reckoning," Liz said, "there are only two major faiths left, Judaism and Christianity."

"You never know. The book might slip something else in there," Sandra remarked.

Paul countered, "I don't think so. There was a clue at the end of the last story. What do you think David, Judaism or Christianity?"

"All I know is that the book has generally put the older faiths first."

Liz added, "We'll find out Friday. I hope the weather is better."

David said, "It will be. This rain is supposed to move out tonight, and sunny skies are forecast for the next few days. By Friday the yard should be dried out."

# CHAPTER 9

Friday



## The Blessing of Abraham

The three pilgrims traveled to a town known as the holy city, and called at the house of a certain man. He had been looking forward to their arrival, and he welcomed them into his home. The four of them went outside and sat in a patio under the shade of his fig trees.

The guests began by telling this man about their travels through the valley, and what they had learned. Their host replied that he was well acquainted with the various treatments for the disease. Then James said, “Would you please tell us about your treatment, also called your faith. Does it cure the disease, also called death? We hope to bring good news back to our loved ones in Villa.”

The man began. “I am a Jew, a son of Abraham and a servant of the living God. Our faith is centered on the one true God. In the beginning, he created both the heavens and this valley known as Earth. He created all living things, including our first parents, whom he placed in a garden. Tragically, our parents rebelled against their Maker, and so has everyone who has ever lived since that time. Because of our disobedience, God withdrew from the Earth and cursed it. This is the cause of our suffering, aging and death.”

“You maintain that the entire world is in revolt against its Creator? I was never taught this, and neither did the religions we encountered.”

The Jew replied, “Impenitent criminals usually don’t acknowledge their own wickedness.”

James began to probe, “Let us hear about the origins of your beliefs. I suppose your faith hangs entirely on the words of one prophet.”

“No.”

“Then perhaps your beliefs come from an unknown number of unnamed sages who lived in an unknown era.”

“No.”

“Then through whom did your God speak?”

“A nation!”

The three were astounded and repeated in unison, “A nation?”

“Yes,” said the Jew. “This is the stage God built to reveal his divine nature and eternal purpose to the world. Four thousand years ago, God birthed the nation of Israel through the man Abraham, so that through his descendants all nations on Earth would be blessed.”

“What is God’s purpose?”

“To have a holy people who will love and serve him faithfully, so he can share all his goodness with them, forevermore. He demonstrated this through the nation of Israel, giving them their own land and rewarding or punishing them according to their deeds.”

“And what of the world’s present condition? Does God have a plan to conquer evil and death?”

“Yes! What he has already done with one nation he promised to do for all nations. This will happen when his chosen one comes to usher in a new world, free from evil, pain and death.”

James interjected. “So you do offer a cure?”

“Not I, but God. This is the great hope of our faith, immortality in paradise, which will be in the age to come.”

“Is the path to paradise well defined?”

“Yes. God has made it clear. All who keep the terms of his covenant are guaranteed entrance.”

Jane asked, “How can you say it is guaranteed?”

Their host smiled. “God promised with a solemn vow. He never lies nor breaks a promise. We know this from his many centuries of dealing with the Jewish nation. As you discovered, none of the other religions had a god who made a pledge like this.”

James went on, “Who is this chosen one you mentioned?”

“He is called the Messiah and will rule over the world to come, forever.

“Where will this new world be?”

“Under the very soles of your feet, for this present world will be replaced by a far better one.”

“When will this happen?”

“The date is unknown but not far off. It could be years from now, or it could be next week.”

The three pilgrims looked at each other with alarm.

John asked, “What does your faith say of other religions? Were they also established by God?”

The Jew answered, “Absolutely not. The knowledge of God came to the world only through the Jewish nation. All other religions were invented by men.”

“What would you tell the followers of other faiths?”

“Abandon the futile teachings of your false prophets, which cannot deliver you from the wrath of God, and come receive the blessing promised through Abraham.”

“Do you teach, as do some religions, that God is in everyone?”

“No. God is near to the righteous person who does his will, but he is far from the wicked.”

“The teachings of your faith—I hope they’re written down.”

“Of course. Those Jews who witnessed God’s deeds and words wrote down what they saw and heard.”

“It isn’t more than one person could ever read, is it?”

The Jew held up a book. “Everything has been collected into this one volume.”

The pilgrims looked at each other with guarded optimism.

James told their host, “Your message offers great promise, but we have heard bold guarantees before that lacked persuasive proof. Therefore, prepare to defend your faith. I hope you won’t tell us to read your book and wait for a warm feeling in our heart as confirmation of its divine origin.”

The Jew was surprised. “Our Scriptures will warm your heart, but I assure you that our faith is founded upon much more solid ground than that.”

“May I assume God revealed himself to the nation of Israel by means of prophets?”

“Yes”

“Many religions we surveyed had only one prophet. A few claimed more, but could tell us nothing about them. How many prophets did God use to transmit your faith?”

“What is your definition of prophet?”

James replied, “A direct witness. Individuals who undeniably experienced God first-hand. They heard his voice, saw his divine works, witnessed his fulfilled predictions, and then had this written down for our benefit. The proof of their divine encounter is the supernatural hand of God, what only he can do.”

The Jew thought for a bit, then said, “Our book records over one hundred prophets like that.”

John jumped to his feet. “My good man, are you serious?”

James asked their host, “What do you know about them?”

“We know their names, where they lived, when they lived, and the historical context in which God met them. This is because they all came from the nation of Israel, whose history is documented better than almost any nation of antiquity. And these prophets did not all live in the same era, but were spread over two thousand years, giving much more credibility to their combined message.”

John inquired, “Exactly how many of these prophets renounced his predecessors, started a splinter group, and claimed that he was sent to restore the true message which had become corrupt?”

“Not a single one.”

Now Jane jumped to her feet. She looked around at the other two but said nothing.

The Jew added, “You should also know that each prophet’s description of God’s nature and his ways agreed completely with the prophets who had come before him.”

James said intently. “Here is the crucial question: how do we know those prophets encountered God? Will you ask us to simply trust them?”

“Not at all,” answered the Jew. “These prophets were validated by two primary means. The first is miracles. Our book records over two hundred distinct miracles, which establish that our prophets met the true God. These were obvious supernatural events, sometimes witnessed by thousands. The second proof is fulfilled predictions. Our Scriptures record over two hundred distinct prophecies that came true, what only God can do, which further confirms that our prophets carried God’s message. The time of their fulfillment ranged from hours and days to years and centuries. But listen closely, because this speaks directly to your quest. These miracles showed power over nature, physical ailments, and most importantly death, providing documented proof that God has both the ability and intention to cure the disease.

Likewise, the fulfilled prophecies show that the God of Israel knows the future and always brings to pass what he predicts. This same God promised victory over death for all who put their trust in him.”

By now, all three pilgrims were standing, as was their host. James said, “Your proofs are astounding and far beyond anything the other religions offered. But how do we know the stories in your book are not mere myths?”

The Jew exclaimed, “Could an entire nation throughout its long history continually lie about what they claimed to see with their own eyes? These historical events happened before the whole nation, and are intimately tied to their origin, laws, religion, and culture. In Israel, the reality of God was repeatedly seen, heard, touched, smelled, and tasted. No other religion proves their contact with God like this, with repeated events and not just words. To not believe their sacred writings is to embrace the absurd delusion that millions of Jews over twenty centuries deliberately set out to deceive you and the rest of the planet with a grand conspiracy.”

John commented, “In stark contrast, most of the religions we encountered were built solely upon one man opinions, and had no mighty works of God.”

One of them asked, “Would you give us examples of these mighty deeds of God?”

The Jew began, “Seas parted, walls toppled, armies routed, the planet flooded, angelic visits, bread multiplied, leprosy healed, rebels swallowed by the earth, audible voices from heaven, the dead raised, miraculous births, the sun stopped, men blinded and men given their sight, fire from heaven, both drought and rain commanded, demons cast into swine, water walked on and storms rebuked, hands withered and hands restored, men ascending alive up to heaven . . .

They interrupted, “That is enough for now.”

The Jew responded, “There is much more I could say, but let me add this. The hand of God was not withdrawn long ago when the nation of Israel ceased to be. On the contrary his deeds have expanded and are found in the midst of his true disciples around the world. Once you spend time among them, you will see and hear of his miraculous works even in our day.”

The three pilgrims sat down to consider what they had heard. Then James said, “We searched the world over for a faith that delivers a clear promise of eternal life and the proofs to back it up. We may have found it.”

The Jew, still standing, began to smile. “Now, my beloved seekers, it is my great joy to inform you that I have saved the very best for last.”

All three jumped excitedly to their feet and shouted, “What is it?”

Their host continued, “The glorious hope of our faith is the new kingdom of the Messiah, a kingdom where evil and death will be abolished forever. I am overjoyed to tell you that this kingdom is already here, having been brought to Earth by the Messiah at his first coming.”

Jane exclaimed, “The rescue has already started?”

“Yes. The name of the Messiah is Jesus.”

The man went on, “I am a son of Abraham, but my name is Christian. Hear the good news of the kingdom of God. Our creator used the nation of Israel, two thousand years in the making, as a pedestal to display the centerpiece of his deliverance, the Messiah. It gets better, for the Messiah, or Christ, is not a mere human like you and me. He is divine, God’s one and only son.”

James cried, “So God himself is the cure.”

Christian said, “Yes. God sent someone who is eminently qualified to heal us.”

John asked with trepidation, “Is it possible all this happened long ago, but now most have abandoned the faith so that your numbers are small?”

“No. The Christian church has never stopped growing over the past two thousand years, and today it has millions of disciples spread through all parts of the earth.”

James said, “Do the followers of your faith consider this message worthy of passing on to others?”

Christian beamed. “The answer is a resounding yes. It is the command of our Lord Jesus Christ and the joy of every Christian to spread the message of the kingdom. Even as we speak, Christian men and women are laboring to carry this good news to the farthest corners of the Earth, into steaming jungles and remote mountain valleys. Many endure tremendous persecution, yet they do not give up. This good news has also been delivered to the areas you just visited, but tragically most men harden their hearts against their Creator. Yet, the Messiah’s kingdom grows daily, just as he and the prophets before him, predicted it would.”

Upon hearing of this evangelical spirit, Jane was delighted.

Christian added, “Although this blessed message had not yet reached you three, yet because you sought God with all your heart, you found it. For, in all nations and in every century, there have been those who sincerely sought

him. God's arm is not short, and he is fully able to gather all who fear him unto himself, even from the remotest corners of the earth."

Jane inquired, "This Messiah, Jesus, did he succumb to the disease and die?"

"No. He was murdered, but after three days he rose from the dead. He has been alive ever since in heaven, from where he will come a second time. Even his tasting of death was planned by God and is a foundational component of how God saves the believer, but I can talk more about that later."

Jane remarked, "So it was demonstrated through him that the cure works."

Christian agreed, "Christianity is the only faith whose leader conquered death and is alive today. Why go to the dead for eternal life?"

"That is the last confirmation we needed to hear, for now we know this is real," John said.

"And exceedingly good news," exclaimed Jane.

John then asked, "What must we do to gain this eternal life which the Christ has promised?"

Christian said, "Renounce your evil ways and turn from your rebellion against the Creator. Transfer all of your love, loyalty, obedience and hope to God's only appointed savior, Christ Jesus. Maintain faithfulness to him until the end of your life, and you will be saved."

James asked, "Christian, would you share what your book says the coming kingdom of God will be like, when it comes in all its fullness?"

Christian responded, "Over 2,500 years ago, the Hebrew prophets predicted the kingdom of God. Then Jesus unveiled it two thousand years ago and will consummate it at his second appearing. Here is but a sample of their predictions. From the prophet Jeremiah: There will be no evil there, rather a just and good King will rule. There will be safety, rest, fruitful labor, hope and prosperity. From Ezekiel: All will know God and there will be peace and unity. Oppression and famines will cease. There will be one King, Jesus. Everyone will have a place to live. From Daniel: The kingdom will last forever. Its inhabitants will be pure, shining like the stars in the heavens. From Hosea: We will come home to God and be betrothed to him forever. There will be compassion from God and all will be productive. From Amos: We will all live together, being satisfied and having an abundance. From Micah: We will be in God's service and he will be the center of the kingdom as all gather around him. Sin will be no more. From Zephaniah: There will

be no shame, arrogance, deceit, nor sorrow. Instead there will be honor, gladness and love from God. From Zechariah: God's rule will be worldwide. Prisoners will be freed. All his people will sparkle, thrive, be numerous and walk in God's name. Impurity will be no more. All will worship and obey God. From Malachi: There will be healing, and the wicked will be gone. And finally from Isaiah: There will be no war, violence, nor weeping, but instead glory, beauty, joy, holiness, wealth and feasting. No harm will be done to anyone. Death will be abolished. God alone will rule over all creation, and his people will live with him forever in his eternal city."



After the end of the story, no one wanted to be the first to speak. Finally, David said, "This was a long story, and we need time to think about it. We'll discuss it Monday."

At one p.m. on Sunday, Liz and Sandra showed up to go with David door-to-door, to ask people their beliefs about eternal life.

At the first house, a man said, "I believe what the religions teach."

"Which ones?"

"All of them," he said, "They all teach basically the same thing."

Sandra cast a grin at the other two and asked, "How familiar are you with the world's religions?"

"Not much, but don't they all tell you to be a good person?"

David answered, "In a way. Do you know what they teach about the afterlife?"

"Heaven, I guess."

"Do you think you'll go there?"

"I think so."

Outside Liz said, "Wow, he's clueless."

The next door was answered by an older woman, who said. "I think God is unknowable."

Sandra replied, "What if someone told you they've heard from God?"

"I wouldn't believe it."

“Why not?”

“Anytime a person talks about God and religion, I’m very suspicious of their motives.”

“Are you suspicious of people in general?” asked Liz.

“I’m not paranoid. I’m only suspicious when the topic is religion.”

Out on the sidewalk Liz joked, “Did you hear that? ‘I’m very suspicious, but I’m not paranoid.’ ”

David cautioned Liz. “We’re doing this as research, not to make fun of people.”

“Sorry.”

Next door a thirtyish woman responded to their question. “Are you with that group meeting at the Jewish guy’s house?”

“Yes.”

“I think it’s marvelous what you’re doing. I’m a devout Christian, and I received the gift of eternal life when I started following Jesus ten years ago.”

David tried to correct her. “Perhaps you meant to say that after you die you will have eternal life?”

“No. I started eternal life ten years ago. I might have to go through the death of this body at some point. But, if Jesus returns first, I get to skip that painful step, like the baby who comes out by C-section. I’m interested in your meetings. Can anyone come?”

“Yes.”

“Are you folks Christian?”

Sandra explained, “We agreed to keep our own faith out of the picture until we see where the evidence leads.”

The woman responded, “That is so fascinating. I bet your discussions are lively.”

David suggested, “You should come Monday night. There might be a few fireworks.”

“I’ll try.”

After they left, David said, “That was different.”

At the next house a woman answered with, “I’m a Christian.”

After several seconds of silence, someone asked, “What do you think about people who follow other religions?”

“That’s fine for them.”

“Will they go to heaven?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“Don’t know. I guess not.”

“What if someone suggested that other religions were wrong?”

“That would be unkind.”

“Are you aware that many of the world’s religions teach reincarnation instead of heaven?”

“I think I’ve heard of that.”

“Where do their followers go when they die?”

“To heaven, I guess.”

“So they won’t be reincarnated?”

“I don’t know. I guess they will be.”

As they headed for the car, Liz said, “Doesn’t know. Doesn’t care.”

## Monday

At the start of the meeting, two people said they would like to join the covenant. David told them they would be most welcome, right after the current members voted on the last story. They never asked to join later.

David Okay, let’s do this. What are your thoughts about Friday’s story?

Latisha I was confused. Was that about Judaism or Christianity?

Paul Both.

Elliot It was about Christianity, but it tried to show that the two are one faith.

Mary It worked for me.

Barb At least we finally know the author’s agenda. My husband’s been telling me all along this must be where the book is going. I should have listened to him.

Owen Is that a problem?

Barb I was hoping for something more impartial.

Cooper What? Just because it favors Christianity means it’s not impartial?

Elliot Oh, come on. According to the book, the Christian faith is a giant among midgets. Give me a break.

Sandra Would it be impossible for that to be true?

Anna Impossible? No. Unlikely? Yes. Americans and Europeans got the right answer. Sorry, rest of the world, you’re wrong.

Paul No! No! Your looking at cultural practices. Most Americans and Europeans are not Christian because they do not trust and obey Christ. The true Christians are all over the world.

Geoff Why are you guys so hostile? We finally found a faith with a clear offer of eternal life and the proofs to back it up. What's the problem?

Tyler The problem is that it's all based on the Bible, a book that has been thoroughly discredited.

Sandra That's your opinion, not mine.

Tyler It's the opinion of every reputable Bible scholar.

Paul That is an out and out lie, Tyler. There are a large number of well educated and reputable Bible scholars who view the Bible as reliable history.

Barb How do those scholars explain the Crusades, Inquisition, and witch trials?

Cooper Can't you even come up with anything in the last three hundred years?

Owen (after a few seconds of silence) We're waiting Barb.

Mary We didn't attack the scriptures of other religions and neither did we attack the abuses of their followers. Why are we starting now?

Liz Can we talk about the story, please? Was it accurate?

Paul It was very accurate.

Tyler Of course he's going to say that.

Latisha Just because you don't like the story, now Paul is a liar?

Karl David, that was about your people. Did you think it was accurate? David had nothing to say. He kept staring at the ground.

Sandra I think the story was right on.

Anna How could the case for Christianity be that good, and the case for every other religion be that bad?

Elliot It isn't that good. Believe me; I've met a few Christians.

Liz We aren't voting on fake Christians, we are voting on the Christian faith. If the story was off, stop slinging mud and make your case.

Elliot I agree with Tyler. The story comes from the Bible, which is a bunch of myths.

Jose Maybe you and Tyler are right, and maybe the Christians are right. The only way to find out is to study it.

Mary You must admit, it has huge potential if it's true. And a lot of people think it is. This is a no-brainer. Let's check it out.

David This discussion is not changing anyone's mind. Let's vote.

David made a stone with the word "Christianity" and set the stone at his feet. He distributed fourteen ballots to the covenant members.

David Put your name on the ballot, and hand it to Karl. He will read the results. A yes vote means we study Christianity. Eleven votes are needed.

Everyone handed their votes to Karl except David, who lingered over his ballot.

Jose Come on, David. The suspense is killing us. You had all weekend to think about it.

David lifted his head and his eyes fell on Mary. He looked down for a few seconds then wrote down his vote.

Karl read the votes. Cooper: Yes, Latisha: Yes, Paul: Yes, Jose: Yes, Barb: No, Geoff: Yes, Tyler: No, Sandra: Yes, Liz: Yes, Owen: Yes, Elliot: No, Mary: Yes, Anna: Yes, and David . . . (Karl paused for dramatic effect.) Yes.

A few cheers came from the crowd, along with a couple groans.

Karl That's eleven yes and three no. The motion carries. We will study Christianity.

Mary Do we keep using the book?

David Yes.

Barb Any chance of us taking another vote?

David I can't see why.

Barb Then it's Christianity for sure.

David Yes it is, like it or not.

Barb Definitely not. It's been a pleasure knowing you fine people. (Barb got up and started to leave.)

Mary Barb, what are you doing?

Barb I don't do anything Christian.

Mary Are you sure? I thought you wanted to find out where your mom is.

Barb Please, my mind is made up. It has been for a long time. If there's a Christian heaven, I'm sure my Mom's not in it. So why would I want to go there? I hope you get better, Mary. Keep in touch.

Barb walked away from the tent. Hank got up and ran after her.

Hank Wait a minute, young lady. You can't do this.

Barb I am doing it.

Hank Hold on just a minute.

Barb stopped halfway between the tent and the house. She turned to face Hank and the whole crowd.

Hank Look at those stones over there, “Humility,” “Sacrifice,” “Fearing God.” You can’t betray those now just because of some pet peeve. You swore to follow those.

Barb I don’t recall swearing to anything. As for my reason for leaving, you have no idea.

Hank Look at those people. Don’t you understand something great is happening here? Maybe there’s someone in the crowd who’s thinking of not coming back. If you quit like this, you make it that much easier for them to quit too.

Barb Save the guilt trip.

Hank Barb, don’t do this. What if there’s the smallest chance that this is the right way?

Barb Even if it were, no thank you.

Barb ripped off the necklace that was around her neck and handed it to Hank.

Barb Give this to David. Tell him he can have his dog collar back. (She marched off around the house.)

David Anyone else . . . ? If not, I’ve got something to say. During the discussion, I was asked if I thought the story was accurate. I was ashamed to admit that I have never read the history of my own people. That is a mistake I intend on correcting. First thing tomorrow, I will be purchasing a Bible, which I will be reading cover to cover. For those of you who have not read the Bible, I strongly recommend you do likewise. We will be talking about it, and ignorance will not be welcome. Am I making myself clear?

Hank Don’t worry, David, if someone’s not doing their homework, send them over to me. (The crowd laughed.)

Sandra We’ve been going at this three nights a week for two months. I think we could use a break. (Several others agreed.)

David I’m afraid we’ll lose our momentum and half of you won’t come back.

Karl These people made a covenant. They aren’t quitters.

David looked at Mary with questioning eyes.

Mary Let’s take two days off and come back fresh and rested next Monday. We need our minds sharp. We’ve got to get this right.

David That’s it, then. No meeting this Wednesday and Friday. But read those Bibles.

A woman in the back named Lynn meekly raised her hand.

David Yes, did you want to say something?

Lynn If we are examining the Christian faith, then we are searching for God because you can't have one without the other. I was thinking that it might be a good idea, I don't know, maybe we could ask God to help us.

David You mean pray?

Lynn Yes. Would you do it?

David Ah . . . perhaps you are better qualified. Do you mind coming up here?

Lynn came to the front, and David looked visibly relieved.

David Go ahead. We'll close our eyes.

Lynn God, if this is your path, please show us, and if it isn't, please show us. We want to know the truth, and we want to find you. Please help us. Amen.

David That was beautiful. Are you a Christian?

Lynn I'm searching.

David So am I. Let's do it together. See you all Monday.

Afterward, Anna said to David. "Was I seeing things or did Hank have tears in his eyes when he came back from pleading with Barb?"

"You weren't seeing things."

"So there's a tender heart under that brusque exterior."

"I think you're right. Say Anna, are you busy this Saturday?"

"This Saturday, I, um, I'm pretty sure I'm not. I mean, I'm sure I'm not."

David said, "There's this place an hour north of here with some beautiful hiking trails. I was thinking of driving up there first thing in the morning. Do you want to join me? We'd be back by afternoon. Do you like hiking?"

"That would be . . . great. Hiking, yes, I enjoy hiking."

"Good. I'll pick you up at your place at eight a.m."

Anna skipped right past Liz, with a smile from ear to ear.

Karl joined David after Anna left. "I'm sorry I put you on the spot earlier with my question."

"Don't be. You did me a favor. I'm a thirty-five year old Jew and I've never read our scriptures. I ought to be ashamed of myself."

"The Bible is the number one best-seller of all time."

"Is that right?"

“Yeah,” explained Karl, “by a wide margin. And it’s been translated into far more languages than any other book, over two thousand I think.”

“And how do you know all this?”

“I’ve been doing my homework, Mr. teacher.”

“You know, Karl, when that woman said that prayer, I got the strangest idea in my head. This search is like being lost in the woods. I’m wandering around, desperately looking for a way out before I die. But, what if it isn’t just me searching? What if there is someone looking for me, someone with powers vastly superior to mine? If so, my chances of being rescued just shot up a thousand-fold. It sent tingles up my spine. I don’t know if that searcher even exists, but maybe he is headed toward me at this very moment.”

Saturday morning, David picked Anna up at her apartment, and they drove an hour north of Ashbow. They parked at a trailhead and started down a path that wound through meadows and forests. It was the first day of May, and the fields were covered with fragrant wildflowers. David commented, “This is where I decided to start the group.”

Anna replied, “Really? This is hallowed ground. I can picture a shrine right over there.”

“Cut it out.”

“David, tell me about your dad. Have you talked to him about what we’re doing?”

“Not yet, although he’d be happy with where it’s going.”

“What do you mean?”

“My dad, Ezra Ruben, converted to Christianity ten years ago.”

Anna stopped dead in her tracks. “Are you kidding me? Your dad is a Christian?”

“He is indeed.”

“What made him do that?”

“It was right after my mother died. Believe me, something that traumatic can get a person thinking about their soul.”

“Wasn’t he religious before that?”

“Not really, he was Jewish in name only, just like I am now.”

“How did you take his conversion?”

David continued, “We’ve grown apart. I take the blame for that. He suddenly got serious about God, and I didn’t like it. Funny, now I’m finally starting to understand him. You know, when Barb walked out, something in my heart cried for her. Good old Hank, he had the courage to say what I was

only thinking. Maybe my dad's felt that for me. You've got to understand, Anna, I heard a lot of bad press about Christianity from my relatives, although I can't say that a Christian has ever been cruel to me."

"Not like Barb."

"You know something about her?"

"I'm just guessing. She seems like she's got a lot of bitterness toward someone. Bitterness causes problems like wars, divorce, maybe even missing eternal life."

"It almost kept me from voting yes," David said.

"That would have been the swing vote."

"We all had the swing vote."

"David, what swung you to a yes?"

"Two things. My dad was one. The other was when I looked up and saw Mary. I realized we've got to get this right, so I voted with what I thought was our best chance. Do you know that I have never set foot in a church in my whole life?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not."

"That must be some kind of record for an American."

David put his hand on his chin. "The hardest part was when I visited Europe. I really wanted to go inside those old stone cathedral churches, but I couldn't bring myself to break my streak."

"Wait a minute." Anna broke in, "Didn't you tell the group that your dad recommended the book?"

"Yes."

"Then you must have known it would eventually steer toward Christianity."

David sighed. "I had a strong suspicion."

"Then why did you still use it?"

"I've asked myself that question a dozen times. The only reason I have is—I really like that book."

"Maybe another reason is that you trusted your dad."

"Could be. You know, Anna, I should invite him to visit. He would like that."

"But right now you are consumed with this search."

"I am. Tell you what, the moment my search is done, I'll get together with my dad."

# CHAPTER 10

Monday, May 3

David stood up in front of the crowd. “Let’s hope everyone enjoyed the time off and is rested. What I say next is for the covenant members only. See that wooden post over by the pillars, with the peg sticking out? When you think your search is over, hang your necklace on that peg. Any questions?”

Paul asked, “Would they still be able to vote, and when does this take effect?”

David answered, “Yes, they can vote. It takes effect right now.”

Paul looked at Sandra and they nodded to each other. They both stood, walked to the wooden post, and hung their necklaces on the peg. Then they returned to their seats without comment. A few people in the crowd clapped.

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” David said.

“I hope you’re not leaving,” inquired Karl.

“I’m not going anywhere,” announced Sandra. “We’re finally getting to the good stuff.”

Jose said, “Can I ask why you two have been coming here?”

Anna jumped in. “To help us, of course.”

David asked, “Is there anyone else?”

Owen stood up and headed to the post. When Cooper saw that, he jumped up and followed him. Geoff swung his head around, scanning the crowd. Finally, he got up, hurried to the post, and hurried to his seat.

“Can we assume you found eternal life through Christianity?” questioned David. All five nodded yes.

“So none of the rest of you covenant members call yourself a Christian?”

Latisha said, “I like to say Christianity is my main faith.”

Paul said, “I’m pretty sure I speak for the other Christians when I say that we don’t want to take sides. We are all in this together, just at different places in the journey.”

David brought the book out and handed it to Owen.



## Objections to Christianity

Owen    There isn’t a story this time. Just the title: Objections to Christianity, followed by some short points.

Liz        No story? I wanted a story.

David     Read the first one.

Owen     Hypocrites. That’s it.

David     How many are there?

Owen     (After counting) Nineteen.

David     Here’s what we’ll do. One person will give a brief answer to each point, explaining why it’s not a valid objection to Christianity. All the covenant members and regular attenders will participate plus we’ll need a few volunteers from the crowd.

Besides the regulars, Jason, Malik, Lynn, and Phebe offered to participate.

Elliot     What if I think it’s a legitimate objection?

David     You can pass on one, but only one. Go ahead, Owen, you pick the victims.

Owen     Okay. Paul, you go first. Hypocrites. Why is this not a good excuse for rejecting Christianity?

Paul        Don’t judge a country by its traitors.

David     Are you sure you didn’t sneak a peek ahead?

Paul        I can’t take credit for that. I read it in a book once.

Owen     Liz, you’re next. I don’t like the idea of hell.

Liz        Thanks a lot, Owen. It just so happens I agree. You don’t give us any time to think, David. Give me a minute. I got it. If hell is real, I wouldn’t want to go there, and me not liking it doesn’t make it disappear. Wait, I thought of another reason. We don’t like hell because we assume it’s unfair, but maybe it is fair.

Tyler I'll tell you why it's unfair because—

David I'm sorry to cut you off, but only one person can give an opinion on each point.

Owen You're next, Malik. Science and the Bible disagree.

Malik Let's see. The Bible is a history of past events. Science only tells us how the laws of nature act today. Science has yet to produce a time machine to the past.

Owen Phebe, you're next. The Bible is only the opinions of men.

Phebe I'd like to pass on that one.

Owen Then try this. There can't be only one way to heaven.

Phebe Great. I agree with that, and I can't think of a good rebuttal.

David We'll wait a minute.

Phebe Okay I got one, but I don't like it. It's not up to me; it's up to God.

Owen Jose next. Going back to the one she passed on. The Bible is only the opinions of men.

Jose When someone writes, "I saw Jesus give a blind man his sight," they are writing down their opinion. How is that an objection?

Owen Tyler. There are too many Christian denominations.

Tyler I'll pass.

Owen Okay, try this. I resent being called evil.

Tyler Um, you see, the Christian faith does seem to call some people, I guess most everyone, sinners, so if it happened that it turned out to be correct, then we probably should, um, accept what it says.

Owen You're next, Chong. There are too many Christian denominations.

Chong I will have to pass.

Owen Strange Bible stories.

Chong May I please get some help from the crowd?

David Sorry, Chong. The purpose of this exercise is to force people to consider the other side of an argument.

Chong Hold on, I think I have it. Bible stories may seem strange only because of cultural differences. After all, it was an Asian culture.

David Good job.

Owen Mary. There are too many Christian denominations.

Mary One might think the jumbled mess of denominations can't be a religion from God. However, most of that is bureaucracy added by men, some of whom weren't even Christians. I heard that on the radio once.

Owen Geoff. Peer pressure.

Geoff Like if none of your friends are Christian. We shouldn't do anything from peer pressure. Better to be right than popular.

Owen Anna. Too much violence in the Bible.

Anna Nice. I'd pass, but the next one is probably worse. Um, there's violence in the world, and the Bible is about life in the real world. Also, I think some of the violence is God punishing bad people. Instead of resenting that, we should take it as a warning and avoid being bad. I can't believe I'm talking like some fire and brimstone preacher. You're right, David. This does force you to consider the other side.

Owen Elliot. The Bible's been changed a lot since it was first written.

Elliot I agree with that. I'll pass.

Owen Next one. Nobody tells me what to do.

Elliot Okay, here goes. If God is God, he has a right to tell me what to do.

Owen Okay, nex—

Elliot But that doesn't mean I'm going to do it.

Owen Thanks for the clarification, Elliot. Karl. The Bible's been changed a lot since it was first written.

Karl I've actually done research on this, and I could find no proof of major changes. There's only minor typos. Did you hear that Elliot?

Elliot Yeah, I got it Karl.

Owen Hank. I've been so bad, God would never forgive me. Oops, I'm sorry, Hank. Believe me; I've been picking the names before I read the point.

Hank Forget it, Owen. I have been bad. If God still wanted to forgive me, I'd be a fool to argue with him.

Owen Lynn. It seems irrelevant.

Lynn Not to me, and that's why I'm here, fighting off mosquitoes in some stranger's backyard. If a person thinks living forever is unimportant, how is that different from being suicidal?

Owen Sandra. Unresolved issues.

Sandra I assume this is unanswered questions like where do miscarried babies go. I can't think of any area of life where every question is answered, especially to our own satisfaction.

Owen Four to go. You're next, Latisha. I don't agree with the Bible's rules.

Latisha I don't either, but I'll play along. That's an argument an eight year old would use.

Owen Cooper. If you believe in Christianity, then why not believe in all religions.

Cooper I think that was pretty clear from the stories. The same reason I believe in the moon landings and not in leprechauns. The evidence for one versus the other is very different.

Owen David. Suffering and evil in this world.

David I've always thought it unfair when people blame the President for a bad economy.

Owen And the last one is for me. My prayers never seem to get answered.

Owen A recent Sunday sermon at my church covered this. The Bible gives several conditions for our prayers to be answered. We may ignore those conditions, but God does not.



David Good job, everyone. It stretched a few of you. Any comments?

Sandra These were only a sample. I encourage everyone to go home and figure out the one that could trip you up.

Paul In other words, the problem is us.

David I have two kinds of students at Vanberth. The one who wants the right answer goes home and studies. The one who doesn't care, goes home and watches TV. Now that we have gone back to discussing attitudes, we won't vote, agreed?

Everyone agreed. David made a stone with the words "Objections to Christianity" and started a new pillar called "Christian Attitudes." This was now the sixth pillar. The fifth one had only one stone, "The Blessing of Abraham."

The following evening, Geoff came out of a downtown bar with some friends. He joked, "It's Tuesday. You guys think there's enough time for me to sober up before church on Sunday?" Suddenly he spotted Sandra walking down the sidewalk, coming straight toward them. "Excuse me," he told his buddies, "I forgot my coat inside." Geoff hurried back into the bar. Once she was well past, he came out.

"Where's your coat?" they asked.

"I just remembered, I never brought it," Geoff said as he glanced over his shoulder.

## Wednesday

Before the meeting David looked over the crowd and noticed his cousin Joseph sitting in the back row. He had sunglasses on and seemed like he didn't want to be recognized, so David accommodated him.



## Reasonable Certainty

During the Middle Ages, four merchant ships were sailing across ocean waters. At dusk, a furious storm surprised them. The small ships were not built to withstand a storm of this strength. Due to the unusually high waves, they were taking in water faster than it could be bailed out. It quickly became clear to all four captains that they would not last until dawn; they needed to find shelter. They had been approaching land at sunset, but the coastline was unfamiliar to them. Communication between ships was impossible.

Therefore, each captain and his assistants had to rely on the maps at their disposal, as well as their sailing skills. The captain had the final decision, knowing the lives of his crewman were in his hands.

The first ship's captain was very eager to make for land. In the distance he thought he glimpsed a bay through the heavy rain and decided to head that way. His navigator cautioned, "Our maps show no bays in this area. What if rocky cliffs lay ahead of us instead? We would be dashed to pieces. Once we get close, it will be too late to turn back since the surf will push us toward shore." The captain trusted that good fortune would smile on them. "Head toward the bay!" he commanded his men. The crew obeyed and turned the ship directly toward land.

The second ship moved along the shore, getting just close enough to discern the coastline without committing themselves. Using their maps, soundings and every other method they could think of, they probed what appeared to be the entrance of a couple bays. However, they passed them by since they seemed too risky. The captain knew they could not keep this up much longer, since water was slowly filling their hold. Finally, they found what appeared to be a promising bay and set a course for it.

The third ship mimicked the second, testing parts of the coast that appeared to offer a bay. This captain was afraid of making a mistake and dooming his crew, so he kept his ship away from the land, even when they passed the bay that the second ship entered. He told his crew, "At least if we stay out here, we are alive. If we sail into the rocks, we will perish for sure." He kept sailing his ship down the coast, not wanting to commit to a choice.

The fourth ship sailed down the coast like the others but kept even farther from shore. The captain turned down each possibility of safe landing because there was a chance it might fail. When they came upon the bay entered by the second ship, he said to his crew, "Listen, men. My navigator and I believe there is a three out of four chance that this bay is our way of escape. However, this is an exceptional situation and our lives are on the line. Strong probabilities are not good enough. We must have absolute certainty. Therefore, we will continue down the coast. Get back to bailing. A few talked of mutiny but did not prevail, and the ship sailed on into the storm.

The second ship, captained by a wise man, made it to the safety of a bay. The three captains on the other ships were gullible, overly hesitant, and foolish. It is not known what happened to them, but their ships were never heard from again.



Liz Yay! The stories are back.

David Who wants to interpret the allegory?

Anna Let me try. Each of us is a ship. The storm is death. The bays are paths to eternal life. The captains represent our choices.

Jose Who wants to admit to being the gullible captain? (All were silent.)

Liz If you didn't pick a bay yet, you can't be gullible.

Cooper That's true, but are you implying that Christians are the gullible ones?

Anna It's possible.

Owen It is, but it's also possible the Christians are the wise captain.

David He's right. And that's what the rest of us need to figure out. Anyone admit to being hesitant?

Anna That could be me. I don't like making choices, especially when a lot is at stake, so I procrastinate and hope it goes away.

Karl Me too. The story illustrated that making no choice is still making a choice to stay in the storm. Death won't go away by ignoring it.

David Thanks, Anna and Karl. I'm like the fourth captain, and I think that applies to a few others here also.

Mary Soon we will be pondering amazing events in the Bible. This story suggests we should not demand absolute certainty about whether they are true. Is three out of four good enough? What's reasonable?

Paul Fifty-one percent.

Tyler I'm not going to become a Christian because I'm fifty-one percent sure that Jesus walked on water.

Paul What's your number?

Tyler I don't know, but it's a lot higher than that.

Liz Why fifty-one percent?

Latisha It makes sense. Imagine you are at a fork in the road. One way leads to death, the other to life. If you are fifty-one percent sure the left-hand branch leads to life, why would you take the other one?

Jose It's not that simple. I won't die if I decline Christianity today.

Sandra In some ways it is that simple. The only difference is that your choice is spread over a lifetime.

David A lifetime that might only have one day left. You never know.

Jose What if it's a three way fork in the road?

Paul Then it drops to thirty-four percent.

Tyler Humph!

- Geoff Should the proof required for miracles be higher because of their extraordinary nature?
- Elliot I think so.
- Owen Then you're like the fourth captain. That was his reasoning.
- Elliot What I don't like is that the proof for miracles always seems to be a little short. Seems suspicious.
- Paul That's the fourth captain. He had three out of four, but he wanted four out of five. We never get to choose how much evidence we're given. Forget about getting the proof you would *like*. What's your verdict based on the proof you *have*? The person inclined to doubt will always set their threshold just above what's given. This story shows the disastrous results that can produce.
- David We will never have all the proof we would like, and we will never have absolute certainty. If we demand that, we'll drown at sea.
- Cooper You won't get your own private miracle from God. Any port in a storm.
- Mary I can see why the book put this story here. It'd be very easy to set the level of proof too high.
- Geoff Do I need to believe in miracles to be a Christian?
- Sandra Yes. They are an inseparable part of the biblical message and can't be removed without making it a different religion. You can't take the H out of H<sub>2</sub>O and still call it water.
- Latisha Okay, I might have a problem with being gullible.
- David Thanks for your honesty, Latisha. Setting a proper threshold of proof could be a matter of life and death. It should be neither too low nor too high. Set it so you are right as often as possible.
- David made a stone called "Reasonable Certainty."

Afterward, Sandra commented to Latisha, "I couldn't help noticing the title of that book poking out of your purse. Do you like it?"

"I love it. This guy has amazing insights."

"I'm familiar with that author. Did you know that some of his ideas contradict Jesus' teaching?"

Latisha said, "I hadn't noticed. I like what he says. It's helped me have a better attitude toward difficult people. He talks about God all the time."

"False teachers talk about God all the time."

"Doesn't Jesus want me to pick up wisdom wherever I can find it?"

Sandra warned, "If you eat a fresh garden salad with dead flies mixed in, you will get sick."

Friday



## Enemies of the Faith

Two soldiers escaped from prison deep behind enemy lines. They were anxious to make their way to the front and leave the enemy's domain. One of the soldiers, Amos, knew from reliable information obtained in prison that they should head north. The other soldier, Clark, wasn't sure how much to trust his friend Amos. Soon after their escape, they came across a third soldier Prescott, whom neither of them had ever met. He told them he had just escaped from prison and was also seeking to rejoin their army. Before long they came to a town where they hoped to find food and information about the location of the front.

Amos told the other two, "It is commonly known that this area has some who are loyal to our side, and they would be glad to assist us. But there are also some who would be pleased to steer us right back into the arms of our adversaries. Therefore you must be very careful what advice you take. Never forget that you are in enemy territory.

"Are you saying that everyone is either for us or against us?" asked Clark.

"No. That only applies to a few," answered Amos. "Most people don't care either way. They are consumed only with staying alive in the midst of a war."

The three men split up and slipped into town in search of a few scraps of food and whatever facts could be gleaned from the locals. Later on, they reconvened to share what had been learned. Clark said, "I was able to strike up a conversation with several people but got conflicting directions. One man I saw by the well encouraged me to go north, but others said go east or south.

Prescott interjected, "I saw you talking to the man by the well. I don't trust him."

Clark went on, "A man who said, 'Go south,' appeared to be extremely knowledgeable of the local terrain. Then I talked with a pleasant fellow, who seemed genuinely interested in my welfare. He said going east or south would be best. Lastly, there was a man who assured me that east was the way to go. He is a leader in the underground and has helped many escaped prisoners make their way to freedom."

“Well, there you have it,” concluded Prescott. “The words of all three confirm that the man at the well was wrong. I say we head south at once.” Clark agreed, but Amos held his tongue. Before departing, they decided to catch a couple hours sleep in a barn where they had taken refuge.

Once Prescott was fast asleep, Amos roused his friend Clark and asked that they step outside the barn. Amos cautioned his companion, “I can see you are inclined to head south, but hear me out. Do nothing rash. All the men you talked to are strangers to you, including Prescott. It is impossible to know after one conversation whether theirs is the advice of friend or foe. Only after you have seen the fruit of a man’s words and deeds can you know whether he is to be trusted.”

“Then how can I possibly know whose advice to take?” asked Clark.

Amos counseled his friend. “Proceed slowly, and in time you will be able to tell the honest from the deceivers. As for me, I know that the front is north. If you are willing to trust me, whom you have known a long time, then come along. If not, I implore you: do not put your destiny in the hands of men you know nothing about. Stay by this town until the truth becomes clear.”

“But what of Prescott, for he is ready to head south?” asked Clark.

Amos said, “Though he appears to be a fellow prisoner, I don’t know if that man is truly on our side or not. Did you notice how inclined he was to discount the one man and believe all others, as long as they didn’t recommend north? Prescott doesn’t strike me as a man eager to find the truth.”

Clark was not ready to trust his friend, so Amos headed north alone. However, Clark did take his friend’s advice and postponed going south. When Prescott saw that Clark wouldn’t go with him, he soon disappeared, although to where Clark never learned. Now alone, Clark continued to solicit information from the town. He kept getting conflicting reports, but the evidence gradually convinced him that north was the way of escape. *My friend Amos has never steered me wrong. As for Prescott, there wasn’t time for trust to be earned.* When night fell, he headed northward. Within a week, he had safely crossed enemy lines, and a short time later had a joyful reunion with Amos.



Jose      Hold it a minute. Are we supposed to believe we are in enemy territory? This book has gone over the edge. Who’s the enemy?

- Liz It does sound paranoid. I don't see anyone being thrown to the lions around here.
- Sandra It's not a physical war, but a battle of information, of lies versus truth.
- Paul As for lions, thousands of Christians are suffering persecution for their faith around the world even as we speak. Millions of Christians died for their beliefs in the last century alone, some say more than in any century before it. Do you still think Christianity has no enemies?
- Liz I'm sorry. I don't mean to belittle their deaths.
- Elliot In spite of Paul playing the martyr card, I'm not ready to concede this enemy territory idea.
- Geoff Haven't you read any books attacking the Christian faith?
- Elliot Lots of them. But they're just people who disagree, not mortal enemies.
- Mary We don't know everyone's motives and never will, but consider this: if someone writes a book refuting a religion that provides a way to escape death, then they *are* my mortal enemy.
- Karl You must admit, Christianity can be divisive. A few get downright hostile.
- Cooper The Bible describes a world at war with God, a world under the rule of his enemy, the Devil.
- Jose The whole world isn't at war with God.
- David Christianity does have a few who campaign against it. If you don't want to call them enemies, fine. I don't think that's the story's primary message. What is it?
- Anna There are people on both sides, so be careful where you get your information.
- Owen And don't blindly take the word of strangers.
- Liz I liked Amos' advice. Don't be rash. Take your time.
- Latisha Why didn't Clark trust his friend Amos and go with him?
- Karl Some people would have. Others are more skeptical by nature and need more confirmation. Clark did take Amos into account for his final decision.
- Mary Remember that earlier story with the voyageurs, about the need to trust others? This story seems to contradict it. Do we trust or doubt?
- Geoff Both. Sometimes one, sometimes the other. Use your common sense to tell the difference.

- Paul Let's say you come across a book titled, "Recent archeological discoveries reveal the walls of Jericho did not fall down."
- Jose That's easy. Anything that discredits the Bible must be true.
- Cooper What?
- Jose Just kidding. I love that look on your face.
- Karl We don't know anything about the author. So we take their claim with a grain of salt and initially withhold judgment.
- Latisha Why would they lie? Books like that are written by professionals.
- David Whether they are lying or deceived, we can't know. But the fact that professionals can be wrong is beyond dispute, because there are professionals on both sides of most any argument.
- Anna The point is not to be gullible. Don't believe the first thing you hear.
- Sandra Unfortunately, there are those who hear something against Christianity on TV and swallow it without question.
- Elliot What if everything you hear is against Christianity?
- Sandra It's very easy to select people, books, and radio shows that keep reinforcing one side. Likewise, I have no problem finding people, books, and radio shows that flood me with sound evidence in favor of Christianity. Be careful you don't dupe yourself right out of eternal life by what you choose to listen to.
- Geoff Did you notice who gave Clark wrong advice? First there was someone knowledgeable, i.e. a professional. Then there was someone charming, and finally someone who claimed to be on his side.
- Latisha To top it off, there was the supposed fellow prisoner, Prescott. We don't know if he was a double agent or just sloppy.
- Paul Those on the inside can do the most damage.
- David You mean a pastor or priest? That's scary.
- Paul Christianity has been damaged far more by enemies and phonies in its midst than by openly hostile outsiders.
- Mary Maybe there's a Judas sitting under this tent.
- David added "Enemies of the Faith" to the "Christian Attitudes" pillar.

Anna, who sat next to Tyler, commented, "You were quiet this evening."  
 "I just felt like listening."

As people were leaving, David shouted, "We will be doing door-to-door again this Sunday. It's an eye opening experience, and no one has thrown us to the lions yet. Have a good weekend."

Mary hobbled over to David with her cane. “I’ve a request, but if it’s too much trouble, don’t worry about it.”

“Whatever you need, Mary.”

“Two weeks ago I started using a wheelchair at home. I’ve gone as long as I could without it here, but it’s getting harder to move around. I can bring my chair, but I’m not sure how to get across your lawn.”

“No problem. By Monday I’ll have plywood laid across the yard.”

“I don’t want to be too much—”

“Consider it done. Is someone helping you to your car?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Hank was standing by. When she left, David said to him, “We’ve really got to get going. I hope that book is finally done with this latest attitude section.”

Hank said, “I’ll be here tomorrow morning at nine with my pickup truck.”

“What for?”

“To go get some plywood.”

“All right, Hank!” cheered David.

The next day, Saturday afternoon, Elliot was shopping in the drug store when he spotted Owen at the magazine rack. He walked over to say hi, but when he got close he was surprised to see what kind of magazine Owen was looking at.

“That doesn’t seem like the sort of thing I’d expect you to be reading,” joked Elliot.

Owen was startled and quickly set the magazine back on the rack. “Elliot! Yeah, you’re right. I should get away from that stuff someday. I’ll add it to my list of things to confess on Sunday.”

“Will that take care of it?” Elliot said with a bit of sarcasm.

“Absolutely. Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.”

Still teasing, Elliot asked, “Besides God, are you going to confess it to your new bride as well?”

“Um, I don’t think so. Her standards are a little higher.”

That same evening, Tyler knocked a second time on the mahogany door. Mr. Peterson opened it. “Come in, Tyler.”

They moved to the den. “Thank you for seeing me on short notice,” Tyler said. “I’m afraid I have bad news. The group at David Ruben’s house voted

to study Christianity. I got myself qualified to vote, but it wasn't enough. After the vote, one woman stalked out of the meeting in protest. It was quite the scene."

"Yes, I heard about that. Don't be alarmed, young man. Most people who pick up the Bible are quite lax about practicing it."

"This group is different, at least some of them."

"I see," said Peterson. "Zealots. We'd rather have them lukewarm. Okay, let's begin. Remember last time how I encouraged you to use the argument from silence? You can use this against the Bible since most of its stories are not repeated by other historians, which proves they probably did not take place."

"When talking about the Bible, always precede it with a qualifier. For example, 'Jesus was supposedly born in Bethlehem,' or 'The Jews allegedly attacked Jericho.'"

"Do I talk like that when discussing secular history, to avoid suspicion?"

"No. You'd sound strange. No historian says, 'Alexander the Great, allegedly from Macedonia.' Don't allow them to treat the Bible like a normal history book. Place it in a category by itself. To prove an event happened, insist they must use a real history book."

Tyler added, "You mean use a double standard."

"Exactly. If the Bible gives one version of a historical account and a secular source disagrees, never treat them as having equal weight. The secular source should always be assumed to be correct and the Bible wrong."

"I tried using what you told me, but those people are slippery."

"Point to the Bible's miracles."

"Really? How would that help?"

"The Bible is filled with miracles, and some people have decided ahead of time that miracles are impossible. As soon as they read one, they reject the whole book, and your job is done."

"What about pointing out discrepancies like, who did Cain marry or how many times did the rooster crow before Peter's denial?"

"Be careful about overusing those. Everyone but the most simple-minded will soon see right through them. Although you can invent contradictions by arbitrarily switching back and forth between an ultra-literal and metaphorical understanding of the text. For example, if you do this with the word 'always,' you can easily make the Bible seem contorted. Strange Christian doctrines have started this way," Peterson smirked, "as well as many church fights and splits."

“I think that’s all you can handle for now.” Mr. Peterson escorted Tyler onto his porch, and remarked, “Is it hard being around so many close minded people three times a week?”

As Tyler headed down the sidewalk he said, “Actually, I’d have to say some of them are fair minded.”

A concerned look came over Mr. Peterson’s face.

# CHAPTER 11

Sunday after lunch, David waited to see who would show up. To his surprise, Karl arrived. “Karl, I didn’t think this was your style.”

“It’s not. I hate talking about this stuff with strangers.”

“What changed?”

“Nothing. I still hate it, but I decided I need to hear what people are saying someplace other than the tent.”

Just then, Cooper showed up. “How about you, Cooper, are you nervous talking to strangers about religion?”

“Nope. My church youth group knocked on people’s doors when I was in high school.”

“Whatever we do, we can’t go to Pierce Street,” Karl insisted.

“Why not?” David said.

“My sister lives there. I’m not that bold yet. But I did invite her to the meetings.”

“Is she going to come?”

“I doubt it. She said she’s busy with her craft projects.”

David grimaced. “Craft projects, huh? Okay, no Pierce Street. Let’s start on Milwaukee Avenue.”

At the first house, they asked the owner what he thought about eternal life.

“I don’t go for any of that stuff, especially the Bible.”

“You don’t think the Bible’s true?”

The man said. “You can’t treat the Bible like a history book. It’s in a special category.”

“Why is that?” asked Karl.

“Talking donkeys, a man in a whale, seven headed dragons. Does that sound like a regular book to you? Aren’t you Christians?”

Karl replied, "I'm not a Christian. It's just another history book to me."

He looked at David. "What about you?"

"Me neither. I'm Jewish. The Bible is my family diary."

The man looked at Cooper. "And I suppose you're a Buddhist. Did you three lose a bet?"

Next door, a woman replied, "If you're here to talk about the Bible, I won't trust a book that's been filtered through so many translations."

Cooper said, "Because each new translation is made directly from Greek and Hebrew manuscripts in the original language, all other translations will have zero effect on it."

She looked surprised. "Oh, I never thought about it that way."

After they left, both David and Karl said, "Neither did I."

At another house, an older man answered, "I believe what the Bible says."

"Are you a Christian?"

"Sure."

"Where do you go to church?"

"I keep away from churches, do my own thing."

"Interesting," David said. "Do you practice what the Bible teaches?"

"Some of it."

"How do you think God feels about that?" asked Karl.

"I don't think he minds too much."

Cooper asked, "What about the Bible's warnings to the disobedient?"

"God is loving. It's not like he's some jealous husband."

Cooper replied, "Actually, that is precisely how the Bible presents God."

The man bristled, "I never liked those parts. I think they were added by someone after the Bible was written."

In the last house of the day, a man said, "My wife's been trying to get me to church. I've got too many objections to Christianity."

"Such as?"

"Hypocrites, hell, all the rules."

David suggested, "If there were answers to each one of those, would you change your mind?"

"Maybe, but who's got the answers?"

"You do. I bet if you forced yourself, you could come up with a reasonable answer to every objection."

“You think so?”

“I’ve seen it done,” David said.

The man thought for a second. “Maybe I could, but I’m not sure I want to. Then I’d have to go to church.”

“Don’t think of it as going to church. Think of it as a search for eternal life.”

“That sounds more interesting. Wait, are you the guys who gather at the Rabbi’s house?”

Karl smiled, “Sort of.”

“Cool. I guess I could take an hour and try your suggestion.”

After they left the house Karl quipped, “Rabbi David. I like it.”

## Monday

People arriving for the meeting were greeted with a plywood path from the street to the backyard. When Mary arrived, she rolled down it in her electric wheel chair. David brought the book from its hiding place in his house and gave it to someone to read.

Jose suggested, “Can we briefly remind ourselves of the previous stories?”

David walked to the pillars. “Good idea. When I read the title from each stone, someone summarize the story in a few words. The first one is ‘Will to Live.’ ”

Someone yelled out, “Young soldier escaping prison.” As David said each title, someone gave a summary.

Will to Live	Young soldier escaping prison
Humility	New home for a jungle tribe
Sacrifice	Jobs at a chemical plant
Assumptions	Tua and her children at the Embassy
Finding Truth	Trapped miners seeking to escape
Deception	Pioneer farmers in a new land
Trust	Voyageurs finding their way home
Searching	Escaping a burning building
Futile Remedies	A lad with a broken watch
Incomplete Paths	Starving villagers go to the big city
Anti-religious Bias	Teenage orphans shun a family
Anti-supernatural Bias	The bullied son

Morality	Men in jail without remorse
Fearing God	Four defiant employees
Comparing Religions	Looking for a well
Religions (all of them)	Pilgrims search to cure the disease
Objections to Christianity	Nineteen excuses
Reasonable Certainty	Four ships in a storm
Enemies of the Faith	Escaped soldiers in enemy territory

“Very well done,” lauded David. “Why did you suggest that, Jose?”

“So when we step onto the playing field, we don’t trip over our shoe laces.”

Mary added, “And I’m hoping we are ready to step onto the playing field.”

“What, so soon?” Karl said. “We’ve only been at this for ten weeks.”

David motioned with his hand, “Take it away, narrator,”



## Textual Accuracy

One year, at a local fair, a unique contest was announced. In the days before the fair, a medallion was hidden within a few miles of the fair grounds. Eight observers saw exactly where the medallion was buried and were given the following directions. Each was to write their own description of where to find the medallion. The length had to be one page, no more and no less. These instructions needed to be as clear as possible, so that even a youth could find the medallion. The eight sets of instructions were assembled into a single, eight-page document. When the fair started, people signed up for the contest as teams of ten. Within a few days, twenty-five teams had entered and registration closed.

On the next day, an official explained the rules to all 250 contestants. “The first member of each team will be given a photocopy of an eight page document which has eight separate descriptions of where the medallion is located. This member is to hand copy the entire document. When he or she is done, the second team member begins making a hand copy of the first team member’s copy. This second team member cannot see the original. All this is done under a referee’s supervision. When the second team member is done, the third team member begins creating a hand copy, working only

from the second team member's copy. This process continues until the tenth team member has made a tenth generation copy. The teams will work in isolation from each other and cannot compare their work with other teams. The only time restriction is that the tenth copy must be finished within three days. Once the tenth team member is done for all of the teams, all twenty-five final copies will be collected together and given to a single treasure hunter who is of sound mind and body. The treasure hunter will have twenty-five tenth generation copies to work from, with each copy having eight different versions of how to locate the medallion. The treasure hunter will have three days to find it."

The 250 people were told that if the medallion was found within that time, each of them would receive a large cash reward. The treasure hunter and the eight observers who wrote down the original instructions would also receive a reward. If the medallion could not be found, no rewards would be given.

The gun was sounded and the teams began their work. Five teams were composed of foreigners. With the judges' approval, the first team member translated the eight page document into their native language, and they did all subsequent copying in that language. At the end, the tenth copy from each foreign team was translated by the team back into English for the treasure hunter. By the end of the first day, most of the teams were finished, but a few were straggling far behind. Not wanting to wait any longer, the teams unanimously lobbied the judges to let the treasure hunter proceed the next morning with what was available. The judges agreed. To no one's surprise, the medallion was easily found within an hour. Rewards were handed out to 259 people.



David What's this one about?

Latisha Copying the Bible.

Sandra The original eight-page document is the Bible as first penned. The twenty-five teams are those who copied it through the centuries. The treasure hunter is us, and the medallion is eternal life.

David Why didn't the teams want to wait for all twenty-five to finish?

Karl They knew it was a sure thing, even with less than twenty-five.

Mary What do the eight versions and foreigners represent? And why twenty-five teams?

David Some of you with more knowledge of the Bible will have to answer that, but be warned. We've been doing our own research, so don't try to slip anything past us.

Blake had spent a couple weeks observing from the back row. He had studied the Bible's transmission process.

Blake The eight separate instructions by the eight observers represent the Bible's excessive redundancy. Many of its passages are repeated or paraphrased in several places, or restated by a different author like with the four gospels. However, the foundational truths of God's message are repeated in the Bible not eight times, but eight hundred times. The Bible is not like a computer where a single broken wire immobilizes the entire machine. Rather, it is like an oak tree where several large branches can be cut off, and the tree goes on thriving.

Owen That's because men designed computers; God designed trees.

Mary So if one of the observers gave poor directions, it matters little.

Paul The twenty-five teams represent different branches of copies, of which there are four basic types. The first type is copies made in cities around the Mediterranean world, and remember that Christians and Jews maintained separate copies of the Old Testament. The second type, the five teams of foreigners in the story, is translations of the Hebrew and Greek originals into other languages, which began about two thousand years ago. The third type is biblical quotes in the writings of Jews and Christians. A fourth type is the findings of Archeology, another independent witness that corroborates the biblical stories, admittedly to a lesser degree.

Blake The story said the teams could not compare their work with each other. Once the branches of copies, translations, quotes, and artifacts are created, they remain independent. An error introduced into one branch will never be duplicated in another, let alone all branches. So in our day, when we read the end result of each branch, what do we see? They all agree, which guarantees the copying process was essentially error free.

Liz Error free? If I've heard it once, I've heard it a dozen times. The Bible was changed lots of times during copying.

Sandra You've got rumors; we've got documentation.

Anna When did these branches start?

- Paul For the New Testament, two thousand years ago, right after it was written. For the Old Testament, three thousand years ago when Israel split into the northern and southern kingdoms.
- Anna Are you sure that corruptions in one branch couldn't infect another?
- Geoff Imagine a Jew living in Egypt in one hundred A.D. He decides to spice up the conquest of Jericho with a new version where the walls miraculously fall down. What chance does he have of traveling to every synagogue in the Roman and Persian world and convincing them to change their copies of the Holy Scriptures, not to mention every translation and its copies and every place this story is referenced in a letter, sermon or commentary? He also has to get every Christian church in the world to do the same to their sacred books. Finally, everyone must be persuaded to destroy all previous copies.
- Anna Geoff, that makes a lot of sense.
- Jose I know for a fact there are thousands of differences in copies of the Bible.
- David I've read that also. What is the extent of these differences?
- Blake This is a very approximate comparison. On each page swap several random words with one on another page. Circle a few dozen random sentences throughout the Bible and a few paragraphs, indicating those as uncertain. If you did that with the two hundred pages of the tenth generation copies in the medallion story, you'd have over a thousand errors associated with just an eight page document. The Bible is one thousand pages and before the printing press the Bible had not twenty-five but thousands of copies, so you'd expect many thousands of these to have minor copying errors. It sounds like a lot, but here's what matters. Can the medallion still be found?
- Karl In a heartbeat. The errors are typos, which don't obscure the final message. Do you agree, Jose?
- Jose I've got to think about it.
- Elliot I don't. The Bible provides the proof, every place where it contradicts itself.
- Anna That's a separate discussion, Elliot. We are talking about whether the Gospel of Matthew has been altered in the copying process.
- Elliot We know people kept changing the Bible during the Middle Ages.
- Anna How do you know that?
- Liz Yeah, how do you know that?
- Elliot Like Jose said, there are thousands of differences in the copies we have now.

- Paul Those are typos. Show us the copies that describe Jesus being born in Greece, or being married, or dying of old age.
- Elliot The differences aren't that big.
- Paul Then tell us the worst difference.
- Elliot I don't know what it is.
- Paul For all you know, the worst difference is that some copies leave out the word *the* in a few places.
- Elliot It must be more than that.
- Mary Elliot, I think you've done the same thing many of us are guilty of. None of us really knows how severe the differences are, and we didn't bother to find out because we didn't care. Now I care—a lot.
- Anna I think she's right. Is there any hard evidence of real differences, like a version where Moses builds a bridge over the Red Sea instead of parting it?
- Elliot I need to do more homework.
- Paul That would be good, but I can absolutely guarantee you won't find alternate versions of any biblical stories. They don't exist. The worst differences between copies are just as that gentleman described, a corrupted word once in a while, and a number of sentences in doubt.
- Jose The more I think about it, the fact that the separate branches all agree at the end pretty much guarantees that errors were not added, at least nothing of consequence. How many of the old copies still exist today?
- Geoff Thousands. And did you know we have copies of the New Testament over fifteen hundred years old and copies of the Old Testament over two thousand years old?
- Jose So there are actually less than ten generations of copies.
- Blake And they had way more than three days to do the copying.
- Liz But why do so many people say the Bible's been changed, if there is no real evidence for it?
- Sandra It's fun to pass on rumors. They don't know if it's true, and they don't care.
- Liz I don't think they should be doing that with the Bible.
- Sandra Now are some of you willing to consider that we might be in enemy territory, and you shouldn't believe everything you're told?
- Tyler I'm willing to concede that the branch theory works for the past couple thousand years. However, before one thousand B.C., when

the alleged exodus took place, the situation was different. There were no copies all over the world and no translations. Therefore, it is possible that a creative scholar added stories to the Bible, such as the alleged global flood.

Karl Why do you keep saying alleged?

David Produce your proof.

Tyler This has been the accepted position of academia for the past two hundred years. (Everyone stared at Tyler.)

Tyler Okay, that's not exactly proof, but we don't have accounts of those biblical stories from any *real* histories, meaning secular histories, so that proves they probably didn't happen. (More staring.)

Tyler Uh, let's see. When you look very closely at the Old Testament it shows evidence of having been edited centuries later.

David The Jewish scriptures have one version of the exodus, one version of the conquest of Canaan, one version of the life of David. Produce the other versions.

Tyler They don't exist anymore.

David How fortunate for your theory. We'll have to take your word for it.

Tyler The evidence can be seen by trained scholars.

David So we should take their word for it? What evidence do they see to prove the Jews were manipulating their sacred scriptures?

Tyler Changes in emphasis, style and word usage.

David That's it? For the past three thousand years, the Jewish scriptures have not changed, other than typos. Even you concede this. The Jews have never shown any inclination to alter their sacred writings, but on the contrary exhibit the highest reverence for it. Are you asking me to ignore the weight of thirty centuries of evidence and believe that my people treated their holy books in an entirely different manner before that, only because some scholar thinks he discovered a shift in word usage?

Tyler Fine. You believe what you want to believe.

Hank You are the one doing that, Tyler, and it's obvious to everyone here.

Anna (After a pause) So what's the main point of the story?

Karl If those who first wrote the Bible knew where eternal life could be found, then we can still find it. The copyists haven't corrupted the treasure map to the point where it is not useful.

Liz And the Bible isn't just one map. It's many.

Owen And did you notice in the story how the authors, copiers, translators and treasure hunter were all motivated to do the best job possible.

David prepared a stone with the words “Textual Accuracy.”

Mary What happens if we vote against this one?

Sandra We set aside the book and study this topic in depth.

David That’s right. We will vote on this one question. Assuming the Bible as originally written shows us the way to eternal life, can we still find it with the copies we have today?

Everyone voted yes but Tyler. David started a new pillar, “Christian Proofs.”

Afterward, Paul and Sandra chatted with Cooper. “You didn’t say much tonight, Cooper. We could have used your biblical knowledge.”

“I’ve got other things on my mind,” Cooper mumbled.

Sandra said, “Would you like to talk about it?”

“I’m sure neither of you would see it my way.”

Paul asked, “I’m curious, Cooper, did you grow up in a Christian home?”

“Oh yeah. We did it all: Bible camp, family devotions, missionary prayer cards on the fridge.”

“That’s wonderful,” Sandra said. “I bet you appreciate being taught the Bible from the start.”

“My parent’s faith has always been genuine.”

“What church do you go to now?”

Cooper said, “I stopped going to church. It’s too hard to find one I like.”

“We sure appreciate your support in the discussions.”

“I know the right answers, but it’s not like I believe all of it.”

Paul and Sandra glanced at each other, but just then Tyler joined them.

Wednesday



## Selecting the Books

During the Middle Ages, a family of five brothers labored as serfs in a large kingdom. One day, an enemy threatened their country. As fortune would have it, the brothers’ cleverness and bravery rescued the kingdom, and they became heroes. In gratitude, the family was awarded a large tract of land,

whose produce would never be subject to taxation. Members of the family wrote down the history of the conflict and especially the brothers' role in it. The five brothers formulated rules to govern how their land would be distributed to each generation of their children. Each brother included these rules, and the history of the conflict, in his will. This arrangement was faithfully followed by their descendants.

Three hundred years later, a man named Martin called together the leading members of his clan to contest the size of the estate he had inherited. Adrian, who spoke for the other relatives, explained to Martin the decrees laid out in the five brothers' wills. Martin appeared to have no case.

Martin stated, "I know about the wills, but I am prepared to contest their authority."

"On what basis?" asked Adrian.

"On the basis that they may not be the true wills. How do we know our predecessors preserved the correct wills?"

"These wills have many historical references to the brave deeds that won our fathers this land. That generation witnessed those glorious events. Why would they save a fictitious account?"

"I don't know, but they could have. Weren't there many accounts floating around at that time?"

"No, there were not. Can you produce these alternate accounts and the alternate wills you allege?"

"No, because they were suppressed at that time."

"Then how do you know they exist, and what is your evidence that they were suppressed?"

"Men are inclined to do such things," Martin said, "Besides, everyone knows we have stories today about the five brothers besides what is contained in the wills."

"Yes, everyone has heard those stories."

"Don't they cast doubt on the family documents?"

"If someone wrote a fanciful story today about the brothers, would you expect us to suddenly abandon the five wills passed down to us, burn every copy in existence, and wholeheartedly pass on this new story to our children as the true family history?"

Martin said nothing.

"Answer us!" Adrian demanded.

"I don't wish to discuss hypothetical situations."

“On the contrary, your whole case is built on them. The absurd scenario I just described is what you allege has happened sometime in the past three hundred years.”

“The alternate stories do exist.”

“First of all, they do not give alternate descriptions, but only add inconsequential details. Therefore, they would not increase the size of your estate as you hope. Secondly, any junior historian can easily prove from independent sources that we have been continually using the same testaments for three hundred years, and that these other stories came into existence many years later. Thirdly, if even a child reads the wills alongside these other stories, it will be obvious that the former are genuine and the latter are the invention of storytellers.”

Martin tried another tactic. “Two hundred years ago, our fathers published an official list of the wills. That must have been when the wills were chosen out of the many other candidates.”

Adrian responded, “The fact that they created a list does nothing to prove that any decisions were made at that time. It would be no different from this tribunal writing down a list today.”

“The fact that they made a list proves the identity of the correct wills was in doubt.”

“There are many reasons that list could have been made. You have latched onto one possible reason only because it supports your case.”

Martin said, “But how do we know their list had the right ones, since it was done a century later?”

“Selecting the right wills was trivial because they trusted the five brothers and the generations afterward to pass these crucial documents down faithfully. There have been no other wills proposed as valid in any generation over the past three hundred years.”

“There are others who doubt whether the correct documents were preserved.”

“We concede there are other doubters,” Adrian said. “But like you they fail to bring a shred of evidence that our ancestors mishandled the recording and preserving of what happened three hundred years ago. Your entire case is built upon baseless accusations that this or that *might* have occurred. It is clear that you have no interest in either truth or justice, but are motivated only by greed.”



- David What question is the story addressing?
- Liz How do we know the right books were picked to be in the Bible?
- David What argument does the story make?
- Sandra Those who selected the books were eye witnesses. They picked books that accurately depicted what they knew to be true.
- Owen And since then, no one has secretly swapped in different books. There's no way they could have.
- Latisha Who picked the books and when?
- Paul The leaders, priests, and prophets of the Jewish nation chose the Old Testament books throughout their nation's history, as the books were written. This ended about four hundred B.C. The New Testament books were chosen by Christians in the first century. Notice that the early Christians agreed with the Jewish nation's choice of Old Testament books.
- Karl Martin kept making accusations, but the other guy would say there is no evidence to support them. Is that true?
- Blake, who had spoken at the last meeting, joined in again.
- Blake It's true. The same doubts raised by Martin are the ones commonly thrown at the selection of the biblical books. How do we know they picked the right ones, and how do we know there weren't other ones? How do we know the whole process wasn't badly mishandled? They have no facts. They can only introduce doubt.
- Anna Do others agree?
- David I've been reading about this, and I agree with Blake.
- Elliot There are other gospels, epistles, and so on.
- Geoff Yes, but like the story implied, they don't contradict the New Testament; they only add extra details. It isn't like there are ten different versions of the life of Jesus. There is only one.
- Cooper I've read a few of those other books, and with some you can tell right away they aren't in the same league as the biblical books, which the story also implied. Some are just silly. Most people haven't read them so they don't know this.
- Elliot Everyone knows it took centuries to pick the books in the Bible.
- Blake You will not be able to produce any proof of that, any more than Martin could. Instead, the evidence all indicates that we have been using the same books from the beginning. Furthermore, those first choices have been confirmed for two thousand years by every Christian generation since, like when Cooper just threw in his vote.

Christians and Jews may disagree on interpreting their scriptures, but neither group has ever proposed changing their holy books.

Mary What if a devious person forced the selection?

Sandra Unlike books such as the Quran, the New Testament was written by many people. And from the beginning it was distributed all over the Roman world and beyond. It would have been impossible for one person to control this.

Tyler Everyone knows there was a lot of politics in the church during the Middle Ages which influenced the selection of the books.

Blake The politics was much later. You're off by several centuries.

Hank That's close enough for Tyler.

Karl If the books weren't chosen by an official council, as the story implies, how were they chosen?

Blake By what was commonly being used in the churches spread through the ancient world. It was democracy, and thousands voted. The lists we've uncovered from the early centuries simply report the outcome of the voting, like on election night.

Anna The story implied it could be proven historically that the church has used the same books from the beginning.

Paul It is proven by thousands of quotes and comments in early church writings starting from the end of the first century, and by what was used for devotions, and by what was translated, and by the number of copies made. As for the other books that didn't make it into the New Testament, we have very few copies, and they were rarely referenced and translated by the early Christians. This shows that the early Christians considered them unimportant, or that they didn't exist yet.

Jose What about the Old Testament? How many books are there that give other descriptions of the history of the Jews?

David None. The only records we have of Abraham, Moses and Isaiah, are in the Jewish scriptures.

Tyler Doesn't this prove we have no idea what really happened?

Latisha I'm not following your logic, Tyler.

Tyler The only source for the history of the Jews is the Jews themselves. Isn't that suspicious?

Anna No, it strikes me as normal. I would expect family members to write the family history. It's their diary. Are you saying they made it up?

Tyler It does make them out to look pretty good. You know, God's people and all.

Cooper Huh? Have you even read the Bible?

Tyler A little.

Cooper Try reading the rest. With few exceptions, the Old Testament depicts most of the Jews as evil rebels whom God is continually punishing, including their priests and kings. Does that sound like something they'd make up?

Tyler Everyone knows the Jews are a little strange. (A few gasped.)

David Let's move on. Anyone else have comments?

Cooper You know, the Christian church cannot totally agree on exactly what books should be in the Bible.

Elliot Thanks for reminding me, Cooper. What about that?

Mary What if, in the medallion contest, the tenth copy from one team had an extra description beyond the eight, and another team's version had only seven? Do you think they should decide the medallion can't be found and give up?

Elliot But this is different. This is supposed to be the word of God. There shouldn't be loose ends like that.

Latisha Who says there shouldn't be loose ends?

Elliot It doesn't make sense to me.

Latisha That's your opinion. God can talk to us any way he wants.

Paul Cooper is right in that different segments of Christianity have slightly different books in their Bibles, mostly with the Old Testament books. These differences show that the selection wasn't done by a single committee, but by churches making their own choices. Yet all segments of Christianity, and even the Jews, agree on almost all of the books, showing the right choice was not hard to make.

Liz If it was easy for them to pick the right books, and there's no evidence otherwise, why do people still question the selection of the books in the Bible?

Sandra Because we are in enemy territory.

Liz I walked right into that one. Are you accusing them of ulterior motives, like Martin had?

Jose You have to admit, it makes a handy escape hatch for the person who doesn't want to obey the Ten Commandments. I think I've been using that hatch.

Cooper I still have a problem. We have to trust the Jews and early Christians. What if they made a mistake? That was a long time ago.

Karl An earlier story showed that at some point we have to trust someone. God isn't granting each of us a personal interview.

Paul We've had two thousand years to check their work, and believers still back up the original choice.

Liz But how can I be sure?

Mary Forget being sure. Make a choice. Did they do it right or not? Which one is more likely to be true?

David Is anyone fifty-one percent sure that they picked the wrong books?

Elliot I'd have to think about it.

Latisha You're like the hesitant captain. You've got to find land sometime.

David If everyone is done, let's vote.

Cooper What exactly are we voting on?

David Did the early Jews and Christians hand down the correct instructions? Don't put your names on the ballot. I don't want anyone's vote affected because they don't want to be seen as a Martin.

When the ballots were collected, there were two no votes. David made a "Selecting the Books" stone.

After the meeting, Karl whispered to David, "What's with Cooper? I thought he was a Christian."

David said, "He is flip flopping back and forth. I don't know where he's coming from."

The next day, Karl paid a visit to his sister. She knew he was a good friend of David. "How are those meetings going at your friend's house?"

"Fine." Karl said.

"Fine? Is that all you have to say?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Did you find it yet?"

"You mean eternal life? No, we're still searching."

"Maybe you should look under the couch cushions."

Karl took a deep breath. "For your information, sis, this is for real, so I don't appreciate you making jokes about it."

"When did you get a backbone? Everyone in the family knows you're only doing this because your friend talked you into it. I heard about this covenant group of his. I bet you were the first one to sign up."

"I'm not in his covenant group."

“Hmm.”

“Okay, sis, you asked how it’s going. For a long time I lived a shallow life, but now I want to know whether life has a purpose beyond filling my stomach. You may think that’s silly, but I’m actually proud of myself. Furthermore, I’m not going to stop until I find the truth, even if David himself drops out. Any questions?”

“Boy, have you changed.”

# CHAPTER 12

Friday

Karl, who was narrator this time, announced, “This story has no title.”



Years ago there was a small African village called Masa. They were mortal enemies with their neighbors, the Witu tribe. One day they heard a rumor that the Witu had assembled an army and were headed toward them to plunder their village. Masa sent two trusted men, Jabari and Sefu, to investigate. After two days the men had not returned, so the village sent a group after them. An hour out of the village, they found Jabari lying dead on the ground. Further on lay Sefu in the same condition. Each clutched a piece of parchment on which they had apparently written something before their demise. The men were rushed back to Masa, and the parchments were given to the village Chief. He called the whole village together and read what the two men had written. Then he posted the letters so anyone could examine them.

First Account:

I, Jabari, was sent by the Masa village because of a rumor that our enemy tribe, the Witu, were on the move. Here is what I saw. We came over the pass to the Langa valley, and looking down saw what appeared to be an encampment. The mist on the valley floor obscured our view so we hiked down the pass to get a closer look, keeping behind the trees as much as possible so as not to be spotted. The whole valley floor was covered with

soldiers. Sets of two dozen black shields leaned against each other forming conical huts around the camp, a clear sign of the Witu tribe. Ringed around each hut were spears stuck into the hard ground. When we got as close as we dared, we sat until late afternoon. Under the cover of advancing darkness we continued quietly toward the camp, always keeping our lips sealed so as not to betray ourselves to roaming sentries. Sefu commented more than once how scared he was. Suddenly a lone man was before us. He fled up the hillside. Sefu gave chase, but I called out to let the man go. He did not listen. I waited a while, then made some arrows with sticks showing the direction I was headed, toward the camp. From a small rise I had a good view of the enemy camp. At that point I wished I had brought my black cloak to cover my white clothes, but some bushes shielded me. What stuck out was a two story house in the camp center. From the guards around it, I presume it was a command center. In my travels through this valley before I had never noticed any buildings. How could they have constructed it so quickly, and why would they do so for a temporary enemy encampment? I took note of other important details and waited for my friend. When he didn't appear I retraced my steps and was overjoyed to see him coming toward me. He explained he had also been surveying the camp, and suggested we move back up the valley for some sleep and wait to see what our adversaries would do at first light. Without my cloak, I spent the night shivering. At dawn we observed the group taking down their tents. After an hour they assembled to march, each man brandishing a bow with a quiver of arrows, two thousand of them. They were marching directly toward us, so we hurried up the valley. If they were headed over the pass, there was only one destination in their minds, our village. It was time to return to Masa, so we cautiously crawled ahead of them to remain undetected. Nearing the village, we both took seriously ill. I fear it was from the berries we ate last night. We both thought it best to write down what we saw in case we don't make it.

#### Second Account:

When we arrived at the Butam valley we were amazed to see the rumors were true. There were our enemies, come to murder our helpless village. As we scrambled down the hillside, the rage in me kept building as we drew closer to the bloodthirsty savages. In the morning, their vicious intentions became certain as they moved straight towards the homes of our wives and children. I only hope we make it back to our village in time to warn everybody. At dusk, I saw a man and gave chase, but quickly realized he was too

swift for an old man like me. I feared the man would report us and waited anxiously for Jabari but he never came. Heading back to look for him, I tried to rouse my courage and descended toward the camp. By now it was alight with ten thousand fires. Then I saw a strange and troubling sight. These men cut themselves and dripped their blood into the fire. It was not a small amount of blood, and my own blood curdled as I heard them chanting “Eat their bones, Eat their bones.” I also saw a few tall shields leaning against each other to make a single pyramid. I joined up with Jabari and we kept an eye on these barbarians throughout the night.



Karl     At this point, the story pauses and the book says, “Re-read the two accounts very carefully, and note anything unusual.”

(Karl slowly read the accounts out loud again.)

Karl     Did you notice anything odd?

Paul     The two men give different names for the valleys.

Liz     The first guy’s account is unemotional, and he gives more detail. The second guy expresses his anger.

Cooper   There are a few unanswered questions like, why didn’t Jabari think they had to chase the man, and what about the building he saw.

Karl     Anything else . . . ? Okay. Let’s resume the story.



Story continued . . .

The village Chief said to those gathered, “As you know, the Witu are sworn enemies of our village. These two brave men gave their lives to warn us that a large army of Witu warriors are headed this way. They may be here by nightfall. We have only forty warriors among us and are greatly outnumbered. We can’t afford to wait while we send more scouts. To save our wives and children, we must flee immediately to the mountains. We can take food and stay in the caves until the Witu return to their land.”



Karl     The story pauses again. The book says, “Imagine you are one of the Masa villagers. Would you pack a few essentials and flee to the mountain caves for an indefinite number of days? The Masa villagers have been enemies of the Witu for generations, so there is no reason to think this approaching army is a peace delegation. You have only two options to choose from: flee to the mountains immediately or remain in the village.” (Karl looked up at the crowd.) Everyone vote, not just the covenant members. Raise your hand if you would stay in the village.

Three people raised their hand.

Karl     How many would flee?

Everyone else raised their hand, about fifty people.

Karl     One of you who voted to stay in the village, tell us why.

Voter    I think there’s a gimmick, but I haven’t figured out what it is yet.

Karl     I’m resuming the story.



Story continued . . .

The village Chief finished his remarks and was preparing to dismiss everyone to go pack. Meanwhile, a man named Kanja was studying the posted letters and talking to a few men who had gathered around him. Kanja called out, “If the chief would be so gracious as to allow me to speak. Though I am not from this village, I think your people have a right to hear what I am about to say.”

The chief replied, “Say your piece man, but quickly.”

Kanja said, “You are fleeing to the mountains because of what is written in these parchments, but have you read them closely? Can we trust what is written there? Personally, I have serious doubts about their reliability because they are filled with contradictions and discrepancies, and there are a few gentlemen here who agree with me. Let me give you a few examples. These two men can’t even agree on the name of the valley they were in. How could Jabari see an encampment from the top of the pass while the valley was filled with mist, and why did they need to keep behind the trees in their descent when the mist obscured the view? There are a lot of unanswered questions, such as why Jabari wasn’t concerned about the man they came

upon, why there was a building he had never seen before, and why he says he took note of other details he never reported. Then there are all the differences between these two men's stories that make one wonder if they are describing the same event. Why doesn't Sefu bring up something as vital as the building, and why doesn't Jabari mention the bloodletting and fires, also significant? Notice how Jabari says they went back up the valley to sleep for the night, but Sefu says they kept an eye on their enemies all night. Lastly, you have Jabari saying they closed in on the camp in late afternoon, and Sefu saying it was at dusk."

The Chief exclaimed, "You can't be serious, man. Are you saying there is no Witu army headed this way?"

"That is a complex question."

"Did these two men see the soldiers or not?"

Kanja continued, "With conflicting accounts and so many questions, I can't be sure what they saw. If an army is coming, how do you explain that scouts from the neighboring villages haven't seen them? That part about dripping their blood in the fire, do you really believe that? No such practice has ever been witnessed around these parts. How many huts of shields were there? Jabari says he saw them all around the camp, but Sefu says, and I quote, 'a single pyramid.' Sefu's timeline is all over the place, from one day to the next morning and then back to dusk the previous day. With all these conflicting facts, I doubt this whole scouting trip ever took place. But I'm not the only one who sees what you don't see. Ask your own tribesman."

One of the Masa tribesman spoke up, "He's right. Jabari says they were always keeping their lips sealed and in the next sentence says Sefu talked about being scared. Does that sound like always to you? Jabari says there were two thousand men and Sefu saw ten thousand fires. Did each man light five fires? It's not clear if the two thousand refers to men, bows or arrows. Jabari says the whole valley was covered with soldiers. I've seen that valley, and if you spread out two thousand men in it, there would be a hundred yards between them. Not my definition of covered. And why would the Witu come at us from the north? Coming from the west makes a lot more sense. In the morning Jabari says they hurried up the valley and then says they cautiously crawled. I'd like to see someone hurrying while they crawl. And how can you stick a spear into the ground when the ground is hard? Jabari's credibility is worthless. As for Sefu, I won't trust someone who won't even put his name on his letter?"

“Have you men lost your minds?” the Chief shouted. “They both saw a large army. They both knew it was the Witu. They both saw them headed this way, and they came back to warn us. We have their bodies to prove it. How can any sane person read their reports and come to a different conclusion? Are you proposing that on their deathbeds they both agreed on a conspiracy, and then bungled their hoax because they filled their reports with these supposed contradictions?”

Kanja replied calmly, “We aren’t saying these men deliberately lied. They were under great stress. Maybe their memories played tricks on them. Maybe they adjusted their stories to fit their life situation. You know how people embellish, all with good motives. But there’s more. If this were really an army, why doesn’t Sefu mention any weapons as Jabari does? Why did neither one give us a more detailed military description? Instead, we have useless details about arrows made of sticks and Jabari going on and on about his cloak. Did you notice how Sefu’s account ended abruptly? Makes one wonder which of your men removed the rest of his story.”

A second tribesman spoke up. “I’ve noticed a few things too. Jabari says emphatically there were two thousand men, not ‘about’ two thousand. You expect me to believe there were exactly two thousand, and did he count them while fleeing? Jabari says a hut had two dozen shields and Sefu said it had a few. Only someone predisposed to believe these reports would stretch a few to equal two dozen. How about this ‘Eat their bones’ chant. Were they speaking figuratively as in they are going to destroy us, or literally as in cannibalism? If we don’t know how to interpret this, why put our faith in the story? Jabari uses three words to describe this alleged army: *camp* six times, *encampment* once and *enemy encampment* once. From the etymology of encampment we know it means camping in a circle, which by the way neither man mentioned, but of course Jabari couldn’t make up his mind since he kept switching from one word to another. But if we look at the word for *camp* in the original language, we know it really means—”

“Stop!” cried the Chief. “In the name of common sense, stop. Who has bewitched you men? Kanja, how dare you come into our village and poison their minds, deceiving them so they keep their little ones here to be slaughtered like animals.”

A third tribesman added, “I’m grateful to this man for helping me see this in a fresh way. I’ve been studying these myths, and I’m fascinated by the two versions of Sefu’s account. I’m pretty sure he is the author of the first five sentences, but when the story starts over in sentence six, that was

obviously added later by an editor. The change in writing styles is obvious: Sefu is filled with anger, but the writer of what I'm calling 'Second Sefu' is fearful. Jabari also shows clear evidence of multiple authors. On the first day he describes these people with military terms such as enemy, guards, and soldiers. But on the next day he refers to them only as group and man. This second portion was clearly written by someone living in a more peaceful era. Also, his cloak is mentioned twice in the first portion but not at all on the next day."

"My good man," pleaded the Chief, "we have two witnesses who clearly described an enemy army headed this way. Please tell me you are not going to sentence your family to death because of word distribution. Will you come with us?"

"No, I plan to write a scholarly paper. By researching the surrounding cultural, political, and linguistic influences, I hope to uncover the real spiritual meanings behind these stories."

"If I could force you to come with us I would, but you must make the choice yourself."

The first tribesman argued, "We listed over twenty-five objections. Even if you could explain some, you can't possibly explain away all of them."

The chief turned to a different man. "What about you?"

He said, "I don't care about their nonsense. I'm not running from an army I've never seen."

"Don't you believe Jabari's and Sefu's reports?" asked the Chief.

"I'm not leaving my house to live in a cave on the word of two dead men, who aren't around for me to question. When I see the army, then I'll run."

"The Witu surround a village before they are ever seen."

The man scoffed, "Don't you know it's wrong to use fear to motivate people?"

"I am trying to save your life!" implored the Chief. "We have two corroborating witnesses with realistic accounts. If that isn't good enough, then you will be dead by tomorrow."

"I'm not worried."

"Then please allow your wife and children to come with us."

The man paused and thought for a minute. "Okay, they can go with you."

The Chief led a host of villagers to the mountain caves, while the rest remained in their homes. Those who stayed in the village posted watchmen to keep an eye on the horizon. By nightfall, no Witu men appeared. Neither did they come during the night. The next day the sun rose bright and clear, and a gentle breeze came off the plain. The dry savannah air smelled pleasant as usual. By mid-morning everyone felt safer and was busy with their normal tasks. Suddenly, several watchmen sounded an alarm at the same time. The village was surrounded by about two thousand Witu warriors. After thirty terrifying minutes, everyone in the village was dead.

## Discrepancies



Karl closed the book, as everyone was quiet.

Karl The story title is at the end. It's called "Discrepancies."

Cooper That Kanja is a smooth operator.

Anna The first objections made a little sense, but they got weirder and weirder as they progressed.

Owen At the beginning none of us thought anything was wrong with the accounts. But after hearing the sheer volume of their words, it almost started to make sense.

Mary When they give twenty-five objections, you start thinking, how could they all be wrong?

David When you heard the end of the story, was anyone surprised?

Anna Not me. It snapped me back to reality. I realized, of course, the army is coming.

Jose I wasn't surprised either, although I did get a bit sucked in like Owen and Mary said.

Paul Did you notice how the objectors had no qualms believing only the parts that supported their objections? They readily believed Jabari saw a mist because they wanted to use that to discredit another part of his story.

David The objectors never offered any reasonable explanation as to why those two men would fabricate their accounts.

Liz Not one of us saw the objections beforehand. They had to be *discovered* for us.

- Paul That's usually the way it works.
- Cooper Not true Liz, someone did mention beforehand that there were two names for the valley. It's clear nothing you say can be trusted.
- Anna Oh yeah, Cooper, why did you say *someone* mentioned the two valley names, when everyone knows it was Paul? It's clear you weren't even here during that discussion time.
- Sandra Discussion time? It was a question and answer period. Obviously what you said just now was really said by a different Anna.
- Cooper This conversation can't be happening because it is so filled with contradict—
- David Thank you for the role playing. The point's been made.
- Geoff As the objections went along, they sounded more and more like some biblical scholars I've read. That's scary.
- Mary Do people do that with the Bible?
- Cooper Some have written whole books using the Kanja method of discrediting the Bible.
- Mary Why would they do that?
- Jose Go ahead and say it, Sandra.
- Sandra We're in enemy territory.
- Mary But why? I don't see that being done with any other book.
- Paul If someone doesn't like the Bible's message, this makes for a handy excuse. There are only a handful of Kanjas who come up these discrepancies, but there are far more Masa villagers who hear them and their eyes glaze over.
- David It's getting late. We'll finish this discussion next week.
- Karl Wait! Before you go, the story has an addendum.



Discrepancies continued . . .

The following are details that the characters in the story didn't know, but are disclosed to you, the reader. Sefu grew up in a different region, and where he came from, they called the Langa valley the Butam. It never occurred to Sefu to use the Masa name for the valley. The reason Jabari didn't feel a need to chase the man they surprised was that he knew from his

garments he wasn't Witu. The building Jabari saw used to be surrounded by trees, which is why he hadn't noticed it before. The Witu cut down the trees for firewood. Sefu had previously seen the building up close, so had no reason to mention it as unusual.



For dramatic effect, Karl closed the book and waited until people started to get up to leave.

Karl Wait a minute. There is one last tidbit in the addendum you might be interested in. It says Kanja was an undercover spy working for the Witu.

A long whistle came from the crowd.

After the meeting, Anna hurried over to see David, but Liz got to him right before her. Anna waited a few minutes, trying to look inconspicuous. When they showed no signs of letting up, Anna got frustrated and left for her car. David noticed her leaving and told Liz he had to catch someone before they got away. As Anna was opening her car door, she heard David calling "Anna. Anna!" She turned and saw David jogging towards her. After he caught his breath, he said, "Would you be interested in going out to dinner tomorrow night?"

Anna stammered, "Well, I . . . of course, that would be very nice."

"Great." David said. "I'll pick you up at six o'clock." David returned to his backyard, and Anna happily floated down the street in her car.

On Saturday evening, David and Anna were seated at a classy restaurant on the outskirts of Ashbow. "Tell me about your family," David said.

"I'm the middle one of five. Not much to tell. My siblings live nearby. It's nice because I can visit them and my parents often."

"Did your family go to church?"

"For a few years, but then my folks lost interest. No one would ever say it, but everyone was glad to have another hour free on Sunday mornings. I haven't been back since. When I was in college, I had a roommate who got born again. She went off the deep end and tried to convert me."

"What did you do?"

“It was spring, so I toughed it out for a couple months. If she saw what I’m doing now, she’d faint.”

“You think you’ll ever get back in touch with her?” David asked.

“Let’s see where this goes first.”

“Have you told your parents what you’re doing?”

“Yes. My mom said, ‘That’s nice,’ and changed the subject.”

“Your childhood sounds like mine. We went to Temple once in a while, but my folks never talked about it at home. That is, until my dad got religion.”

David shifted in his seat. “Say Anna, can I ask a small favor?”

“Of course, what is it?”

“I’m not sure how to ask this. I need a clear head during the meetings. You know how important this is to everyone.”

“I know,” Anna said. “What are you saying?”

“Would you mind not sitting next to me? I can’t have any distractions right now. Just for the next few weeks.”

Anna blushed with a slight smile. “I guess it could be taken as a compliment.”

“Yes, yes, a big compliment. You’re the only one I’m asking to do this. Anyone else could sit next to me and my pulse wouldn’t go up thirty beats.”

Now Anna was really blushing and didn’t know what to say, so she changed the subject. “Has it been hard talking about Christianity?”

“I’m not a fan,” David groaned.

“You don’t show hostility, not like some of those guys.”

“I’m trying very hard to be open-minded. I have to be honest. The Christian faith appears better than anything else we’ve looked at.”

Anna confessed, “I don’t have your integrity. Even if turns out to be the one, I’m afraid of my family’s reaction.”

“I can’t afford to be wrong.”

“You mean for Mary’s sake?”

David explained, “Not just for her, but for everyone. For you. Our decisions pull others toward truth or toward error.”

“Can I ask a personal question?”

David straightened up in his seat. “Uh, what is it?”

“Are you resistant to Christianity because you think it won’t reunite you with your brother Samuel?”

“Maybe.”

“You still haven’t gotten over his death, have you?”

“Why should I?”

“How will avoiding Christianity reunite you with him?”

David stood up. “It’s getting late. Time to head home.”

The next day, after lunch, no one showed up to go with David door to door. He wasn’t interested in going by himself, so he had the afternoon off, but he didn’t mind. He was now more than two weeks into reading the Bible for the first time, and he was finding it harder and harder to put down.

## Monday

The crowd continued to grow each week as word spread. As David welcomed them, he said, “I trust you all had a relaxing weekend with this beautiful May weather. Tonight we continue our discussion of last Friday’s discrepancy story about the Masa village. Who wants to summarize the story’s main point?”

Geoff When reading the Bible, don’t go wacko.

Elliot Define wacko.

Geoff Read and understand the Bible like any other book.

Liz I thought the point was that the Bible is not like any other book.

Karl What he means is the Bible talks to us like we talk to each other.

Paul Don’t invent special ways of understanding the Bible. Assume it uses the same rules of communication that we use in everyday life.

Cooper Why assume that? Isn’t the Bible a special book?

David Where would you get the special rules from? Make them up?

Anna Can someone give an example? I’m having trouble following this.

Jose Over the weekend I wrote a list of what was wrong with the twenty-five objections. Let me read a few. If a person’s story has something odd, that doesn’t disqualify everything else they say. Two people explaining the same event usually give different descriptions, and one is bound to leave out something that the other includes. Don’t take things too literally, or read too much into what is said, especially exaggerations. Always rarely means always. Mathematical

precision should not be expected in most communication. Don't read too much into silence. Don't fixate on one word or non-essential details. The Masa objectors did all this.

David Well done, Jose.

Elliot But the Bible has genuine contradictions.

Owen Like what?

Elliot One place says there is one, and another place says there are two. One author says a man went from A to B to C, and the next author says he went from A to C. Some chronologies can't be reconciled. It describes actions that reasonable people would never do.

Latisha Elliot, those are just like the discrepancies Kanja brought up.

Mary Some of the objections in the story had to do with claiming multiple authors. Do people really do that with the Bible?

Cooper You bet they do.

Paul Scholars look for changes in word usage, shifts in tone, or a portion restated in detail, and then construct a theory. When they revisit the text, not surprisingly it matches their theory, strengthening their delusion. Unfortunately, since this is done by educated professionals, many have accepted it.

David Hmm. Maybe we are in enemy territory. Karl says there is a little more of the Masa story in the book.



Discrepancies continued . . .

Revisit the Masa story but with this change. The Witu tribe has acquired guns from Europeans. The Masa village has never been in contact with the outside world, so they know nothing about the existence of firearms. Jabari's and Sefu's accounts are exactly the same, except they both mention the Witu taking target practice. They describe Witu soldiers killing goats from a distance, by pointing a magic stick at them, one that makes a loud noise. With this change in the story, consider again the twenty-five objections. Are some of them now valid?



- Tyler I can see why a lot more villagers would doubt the accounts.
- Elliot That wasn't the question. Does it make any of the twenty-five objections valid?
- Tyler If I heard a wild story about magic sticks, I would be more inclined to doubt other parts of the story.
- Liz But the rest of the story isn't deserving of doubt. There are no real discrepancies in their letters.
- Anna I kind of agree with Tyler. If you add this unbelievable part of the story, it seems to make the other parts less credible.
- Jose No. The other parts are credible, based on the rules of normal communication. Adding a miracle doesn't change the rules.
- Cooper Tyler and Anna are transferring their doubt over the magic sticks to the other parts of the story, but is that valid?
- Geoff I would think not.
- Paul Here's the point the book is making. Step one: I don't think miracles exist, so I'm inclined to doubt the Bible's truthfulness. Step two: Since I'm already suspicious of the Bible, I find discrepancies in it, which isn't hard to do as we saw from the story. Step three: Now my initial doubt is reinforced by the discrepancies I think I've discovered, and I trust the Bible even less. Some use this flawed reasoning to dismiss the whole Bible.
- Tyler So what would you have done if you heard the accounts with the magic stick part?
- David I hope I would have said that the part about the magic sticks sounds unbelievable, and I can't explain it, but I still think they saw an army and we should flee. It would be very hard for me to believe that both of them invented the whole thing right before they died.
- Anna David, I've got a feeling you may have to make that choice soon.
- Karl There is one more portion of the story.



Discrepancies continued . . .

Return one more time to the Masa story, the original version without the guns, but with this change. Jabari and Sefu claim to be prophets of God. Their two accounts and the story of the slaughter make it into the village's

Holy Scriptures as a lesson for future generations. Now that the two accounts are part of God's word so to speak, do the twenty-five objections have more validity? In other words, should the accounts now be judged with different rules?



- Latisha In other words, if Jabari's and Sefu's accounts were added to the Bible, would they now have errors?
- Liz That's easy. The answer is no, since they didn't have errors before.
- Mary What do you mean?
- Liz If there was nothing wrong with them before, there's nothing wrong with them now because we should judge them with the same rules.
- Cooper Shouldn't we judge them with stricter rules if they are in the Bible? Shouldn't they be perfect?
- Anna Define perfect.
- Cooper No errors.
- Anna What errors did they have?
- Cooper They were sloppy with their descriptions and facts. That's okay for normal conversation, but not for something I'm supposed to base my whole life on.
- Jose You just did it.
- Cooper Did what?
- Jose You invented your own special rules for understanding the Bible.
- Elliot I agree with Cooper. If the Bible is from God, it should be perfect.
- Karl Language is inherently imperfect. It doesn't work like an equation. You could no more define a standard of perfection for language than you could for a tree.
- Elliot So the truth doesn't matter?
- Anna We aren't talking about truth or falsehood. We are talking about how we commonly communicate with words.
- Sandra The purpose of their reports was to relate that an enemy army was coming, and they did that perfectly.
- Mary Let's say I believe the Bible is correct. I've still got to understand what it's telling me to do. Parts of it are confusing.
- Tyler There are hundreds of interpretations by Christian denominations.

Paul Not hundreds, but there are more than there should be.

David New topic. Interpreting the Bible. Is it hard?

Liz I wouldn't worry about what the Christian denominations are saying. Those are the opinions of men.

Anna I'm not sure they would agree with you.

Sandra In a way they would. None of them is claiming to add to the Bible; they only claim to be interpreting the Bible.

Liz Why study a copy of a copy of a copy? Start with the master copy and read it for yourself.

Jose Doesn't it concern anyone that all these denominations are interpreting the Bible differently?

Paul My faith isn't based on the fact that no one ever distorted the Bible. It's clear enough to me.

Jose I think parts are confusing.

This was the third meeting for Jada, and she decided to say something.

Jada Can I tell a short parable I heard in a sermon once?

David You've got the stage.

Jada A father was leaving on a long business trip, so he gave his teenage son instructions on watering his precious rose bushes. He explained how much water to give them and how often. He told his son that with the dry climate and sandy soil, if the bushes didn't get regular watering, they would die. Then the father demonstrated a hi-tech gadget he had recently bought for measuring soil moisture. After his father left on his trip, the son tried to use the gadget. Since he wasn't technically inclined, he couldn't make it work. Because that part of his father's instructions was not clear, he decided to not water the rose bushes and they all died.

Liz Yikes! Why would he not water the bushes only because he didn't know how to use the gadget? I'd hate to be in his shoes when his father gets home.

Sandra And I'd hate to be in some people's shoes when they try to explain to God at the final judgment why they ignored his commands, just because parts of the Bible were unclear.

Latisha What part of "Love your neighbor as yourself" isn't clear?

Owen Of course, we aren't expected to keep all of God's commands.

David Really? Why not?

Owen That could get into a lengthy theological discussion.

Karl So what should be my approach when reading the Bible? Apparently, some people are getting the wrong answer.

Jada I've got another story for that.

David Go ahead.

Jada A solo pilot made an emergency landing with his small plane at a remote place in the frozen Arctic. His radio wasn't working. With his plane broken down, he frantically pored over the troubleshooting manual. Do you think he will misinterpret what it says? I doubt it, because he is motivated. If he doesn't get his plane fixed, he will die. He won't play the silly games we do with the Bible, such as reading unintended meaning into words or focusing on a few sentences and ignoring the rest. He won't search for hidden truths or numerical patterns, and neither will he repeatedly chant from the manual thinking it has magical powers. He won't build a doctrine on only a few sentences. He won't devote most of his time to singing it, memorizing it, or learning its original language. Instead he will study it for the sole purpose of doing everything it says. Read the Bible as if your life depends on it, because it does.

Hank They call that the fear of God. Reminds me of my dad. He was old school. If he gave you a chore, you had better do it. If you weren't sure about something, you had better ask him. The one thing you didn't want to do was ignore him.

Geoff So is God old school?

David took a new marble stone and put "Discrepancies" on it.

David A yes vote means you agree with this statement: I will read and understand the Bible using the same rules we employ in all other areas of communication.

A silent ballot was used. Two people voted no, and the rest voted yes. David laid the stone on the "Christian Proofs" pillar.

After the meeting, David made a special point of visiting with Paul. "I saw my cousin Joseph in the crowd a couple weeks ago, but he hasn't come back. I was surprised to see him. It would cause a big uproar in my family for any of the relatives to convert to Christianity."

Paul said, "Interesting."

Sandra was standing within earshot. After David left she walked over to him. "Paul, you are a great contributor during the discussions, but can I give you a bit of advice? During social times, people are usually looking for more than a one-word answer."

Paul said, "Understood."

# CHAPTER 13

At ten o'clock the next morning, Ezra Ruben strolled down the bustling sidewalks of Brooklyn and turned into a coffee shop. His friend Daniel had gotten there before him and was reading the newspaper at a table in the corner. "Any good news today?" asked Ezra.

"No," grumbled Daniel. "It's depressing as usual. What's the news on David? Have you talked to him yet?"

"No, no. I'm keeping out of it."

"Do you think that's wise?"

"It's not the way I want to do it, but every time I pray, it's what I feel led to do. David was never interested in talking about our Lord. I tried more than once to point him to Jesus, but he would politely change the subject."

Daniel folded his newspaper and set it on the table. "Aren't you wondering what's going on?"

"I get updates from my spy."

"Your spy?"

Ezra explained, "I've been in contact with someone who attends the meetings. In fact, this person is part of what he calls the covenant group."

"How did you manage that?"

"It wasn't me. This person sent me a few letters, keeping me abreast of their progress. How they got my address, I don't know."

"So tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Their progress!" cried Daniel. "Is David heading in the right direction?"

"It sounds like it. The letters aren't very specific, but they help me know how to pray for him and for the others searching with him."

"In the meantime you wait. Is it hard?"

"It's killing me." groaned Ezra. "I wake up in the middle of the night, always around three o'clock. Sometimes I don't get back to sleep. Daniel,

this has been a long spring. I don't know if the outcome will be grief or glory. I've been waiting ten years for him to find our Messiah."

"How long are you going to wait? Until he calls you?"

Ezra grinned. "Not necessarily. I've been feeling more and more that I should hop on a plane and go out there."

"I thought you were worried that your presence would disturb David."

"I've got a plan to slip in undercover at first. They meet in his backyard, and several dozen people attend, so it shouldn't be hard to get lost in the crowd and sit in the back row. I'll wear a sweatshirt and pull the hood over my head. I also bought a pair of sunglasses. See, I've got them right here in my shirt pocket. I'm ready to go."

"When do you think that will be?"

"I've wanted to go for weeks, but the Holy Spirit makes it very clear that it's not the right time yet. When he says 'Go,' I'll go."

## Wednesday

It was Jose's turn to read, and David handed him the book. After he opened it and saw the title, he said, "David, I think this one will get your attention."



## History

There once was a small country located deep within a mountainous region. Because of the height and ruggedness of the surrounding peaks, the people of this land had little contact with the rest of the world. Their nation consisted of one large city surrounded by a dozen villages. A governor and his assistants ruled from the capital city. Each outlying village was overseen by a mayor and three deputies, subject to the governor.

One day, the mayor and deputies from a certain village appeared at the door of the governor's office. When asked what their business was, they said, "We believe our village can be administered without the governor's interference, and we have come to declare our independence."

The governor's assistant told them, "What you propose is treason!"

They replied, "We expect you will charge us with anarchy, but we are prepared to challenge in a court of law the very basis of the governor's rule."

“A court trial you will have.”

A trial was convened. The mayor and his three deputies brought their own defense attorney. A judge presided over the trial, and a jury of six men and six women was chosen. Every seat in the court room was filled. The judge announced the charges against the four defendants as willful rebellion against the law of the land.

The defense attorney brought his opening remarks. “As everyone in our land knows, the rule of our governor and his predecessors is based entirely on a series of ancient tales that allegedly took place in this land years ago. We intend to show that those events almost certainly did not happen as is commonly believed today. If it can be demonstrated that the governor’s right to rule is based only on myths, then he has no lawful authority over any village.”

Next, the prosecution took the floor. “For the sake of the jury, I will summarize the events which gave birth to our nation’s present government. Before the current regime, our land was ruled by a dynasty of ruthless despots. They had no regard for the rights of their subjects and laid a heavy hand of oppression on the land. Then one day, to our good fortune, we were visited by representatives of a great and distant nation, the Tular people. This powerful country was willing to help us throw off the bitter yoke of these unjust dictators. In the early years, the Tulars worked with whoever was willing and over time built up a network of underground resistance. Their spies supplied our patriots with arms, information, and hope, and through this our countrymen learned that the Tulars are people of integrity and kindness.

“Finally, when the time came that enough loyalists were spread through the land, the Tulars sent a large army. The dictator’s army stood up to the Tulars for a time because the mountainous terrain made a quick victory difficult. However, victory was inevitable for the Tulars, and with the help of the local resistance, they defeated the dictator and removed him from power.

“Because the Tular people are benevolent, they made our small country a protectorate. Otherwise, a neighboring dictator would have quickly enslaved us. Since they had worked with the underground, the Tulars knew who was loyal and could be trusted to act with justice. From these faithful ones, the Tulars appointed a governor and representatives, and gave them a set of fair laws. They also left instructions describing the governor’s succession. The first governor began to rule two hundred years ago, and his

successors have reigned ever since with the wise and compassionate leadership they learned from the Tulars.

“Now I will answer the accusation of the four defendants as to how we know the origin of our current regime. The speeches and daring deeds I just described are documented in our beloved National History. This history has guided our country for the past two centuries, and it holds the righteous laws we were given. A copy of this history can be found in every home, school and business in our nation. It is this book these men defy. Let me remind you what the Tulars said when they set up our government, that any resistance against it would be subdued with the same force used to remove the previous evildoers.”

With the conclusion of opening arguments, the judge directed the prosecutor to bring forth his witnesses. The prosecutor stated, “These men challenge the events leading to the establishment of our government. Since this took place centuries ago, I can bring no living witnesses. However, I can bring a record or deposition, of what was said and done by those who lived at that time. Therefore, my witnesses will consist of everything contained in this book, our National History.”

The prosecutor continued, “I expect the jury is familiar with the contents of this book. Nevertheless, each juror will be given a copy to study during the trial.” The prosecutor dramatically laid the book on the witness stand. “Ladies and gentleman of the jury, these are my witnesses, everything recorded herein. I rest my case.” The prosecutor then sat down.

The judge addressed the jury. “The prosecutor has presented his witnesses, and they establish the governorship. The testimony of these witnesses is abundant and clear. Therefore, the defendants have one recourse to win their case. They must discredit these witnesses, showing that they cannot be trusted to have told the truth. If the defense cannot demonstrate that these witnesses were in error, then the jury must vote in favor of the prosecution and declare these four men guilty of high treason. The defense may now present their case. The prosecuting attorney will speak on behalf of the book.”

“Thank you, most honorable judge,” said the defense attorney. “My first accusation against the prosecution’s witnesses is this. The authors of our National History may have forgotten what happened by the time they wrote it down.”

“Do you have proof of that?” asked the prosecuting attorney.

“Not directly, but the time span could have been decades.”

“Could have been? For all we know, it was written down the day it happened, or they worked from previously written material.”

“People do forget things.”

“People do not forget major events like these, even to the end of their life. In addition, many things in this book are described by more than one author. How is it that all their faulty recollections agree with each other?”

“They don’t agree,” interrupted the defense attorney. “I think they contradict each other.”

The prosecutor replied, “This book has many witnesses describing our dictator’s horrible rule, the Tulars’ first contact with us, the climactic battle, the installation of the governor, and our laws. On these, all my witnesses are in agreement.”

“Granted they all describe essentially the same thing, but look closely and you will find minor differences in names, numbers, descriptions and which details are included.”

“You admit all the witnesses agree on the major events, the same events you claim didn’t happen. You would expect two people describing the same incident to differ in minor details. All you have done is strengthen my case by showing that my witnesses were independent and didn’t copy each other’s work.”

The defense attorney produced a book. “This book has stories and poems written in the centuries before the time of the Tulars. I can point to several similarities between what’s in this book and the National History. This shows that the latter was most certainly plagiarized from the former.”

The prosecutor answered, “I can do the same between any two historical works of similar size. Show us your analysis where you did this exercise between many pairs of books, and can demonstrate there’s a much higher degree of similarities between your book and the National History. In addition, the strength of your argument depends heavily on what you mean by similarity. Is it an entire paragraph word for word, or just a similar theme?”

The defense changed the subject and motioned toward the book on the witness stand. “You must admit these stories are quite unbelievable. They speak of the Tulars’ amazing weapons, which have not been seen in our land since that day.”

The prosecutor inquired, “Why does that make the stories unbelievable?”

“Such weapons don’t exist.”

“My witnesses saw these weapons and wrote about them. You say they don’t exist only because you have never seen them. The jury will decide who to believe.”

“This book has all kinds of fantastical stories, like the size of the Tular army being larger than the entire population of our country. Who ever heard of an army that big?”

“Who ever heard of it? We all have. It’s in our National History.”

“You can’t use that book for evidence,” argued the defense, “it was written by believers in the Tulars, so it’s biased. We need genuine history, written by unbiased unbelievers.”

The judge stepped in. “They ‘believe’ because they trust in what they saw with their own eyes. This is the definition of the word witness. Explain how that makes them biased.”

“There are unbelievers, and we should hear their side of the story too.”

The prosecution jumped back in, “I know you cannot produce a single unbeliever who was at the scene. You only have those who were not, who refuse to trust the believers, men such as you and your clients. Isn’t it rather you unbelievers who are biased?”

“Unbelievers could have been at the scene, but their testimony was suppressed and destroyed.”

The judge said, “Are you asking the jury to consider non-existent testimony that you imagine in your head?”

The defense attorney went to a new point. “The evidence is limited because your witnesses are all contained in one book.”

The prosecutor responded, “This book contains dozens of documents from dozens of witnesses, spanning many decades. We have merely collected them in one place for convenience.”

“Perhaps, but these were significant events. You would expect people in other countries to write about them as well.”

“The histories of a couple other nations do briefly mention these events, but as expected our fathers wrote about it in the greatest detail. We are waiting for an argument to discredit the witnesses I’ve brought forward. How does the lack of additional witnesses discredit the ones we have?”

The defense attorney turned his notebook to the next page. “Everything in the National History was written centuries ago. It is well known that ancient people were simple-minded, undependable, and prone to inventing stories.”

The prosecutor replied, “And your proof for this is . . . ?”

“Consider the myths and superstitions the ancients created, that no one in this room takes seriously.”

“The bookstore down the street is filled with stories of monsters, ghosts, and magic.”

“We all know those are fantasies.”

“And how was it different in the past?”

“Everybody knows people were more gullible back then.”

The judge interrupted. “Council for the defense, in this court we deal with facts. Your personal opinion on what *everybody knows* is inadmissible. Do you expect the jury to disbelieve the witnesses simply because you call them undependable?”

The defense turned toward the prosecutor. “Well then, if you insist on believing the stories in your book, you must believe all ancient myths.”

“Why?” said the prosecutor, “Our history and ancient myths are as far apart as east is from west. No one believes myths, not even the myth teller. It is understood from the beginning to be a fable, with no connection to reality. In stark contrast, our history has its feet firmly planted on the ground with literally hundreds of references to known people, places and dates. If you can’t tell the difference between this history and a myth, I suggest you are out of touch with reality.”

“You exaggerate. That book isn’t historical.”

The prosecutor was astounded. “This book is as historical as it gets. It lists local villages, rivers and mountains, which still have the same names today. Its dates can be verified with archeological artifacts. It mentions plants, animals, weather, natural disasters, genealogies, economic turmoil, geography, architectural styles, thousands of personal names, languages, dynasties, wars—why it even has the results of a census.”

“I still think it’s nothing more than myths.”

The judge addressed the defense attorney with mounting impatience. “To point a finger at the prosecution’s witnesses and say they made it all up has never been acceptable in any court of law.”

The defense motioned to his assistant, who brought in a cart filled with dozens of books and papers. He explained, “This cart contains the following: commentaries, sermons and devotionals on the National History both pro and con. It has ballads, songs and poems our people have composed about the Tulars. It also includes numerous articles from our newspaper’s opinion

page. Granted there is much here, but these are relevant and should also be considered for this case.”

The prosecution smiled, “Be our guest and read us a sample from your smoke screen cart. By the way, this court only accepts testimony from first hand witnesses who were at the scene, and not the later opinions of those who were not present.”

After consulting his four defendants, the defense chose a new tactic. “This all boils down to the words of a few men.”

“About forty men authored portions of this book,” the prosecutor said, “an astonishing number of witnesses for any court case.”

“Maybe all forty collaborated with each other.”

“Hardly, since they lived in different generations. The time between the first Tular contact and the liberation was two hundred years, during which our history was continuously being written.”

“What about the thousands of others who lived during those times? We don’t know what they believed.”

The prosecutor replied, “We do know, for they embraced this book and made it the foundation of our nation’s laws and culture.”

“Did those thousands really know whether the events in that book happened as written?”

“The only way they couldn’t know is if the whole nation was in a coma. The events and speeches in our National History were public events, witnessed by thousands. What if I asked you to read my latest book describing our country’s civil war, which took place forty years ago?”

“We’ve had no civil war for hundreds of years,” the defense attorney responded.

“Precisely. You knew in a heartbeat my book is fiction, and that is how long it would have taken our countrymen to make the same judgment on this history. Have you considered how this book gives endless details in its stories, such as weather conditions, local customs, slang, coins, names of officials, nearby towns, and so on?”

“What does that prove?” scoffed the defense.

“If a man was trying to cheat me, claiming to be a distant relative, the last thing he would do is give details about my family, because I would quickly discover his lie. Yet the accounts in this book go out of their way to list superfluous facts which made it easily falsifiable to that generation. In contrast, myths cannot be falsified since they never give any historical details.

“So the masses may have known it was true. What does that prove?”

The prosecutor raised his voice. “It means my number of witnesses just exploded from forty to forty thousand. I’ve added all those who knew whether these events happened and still choose to embrace this book as the soul of our nation, casting their vote as to its historicity.”

The defense argued, “When you appeal to those thousands of witnesses, you exaggerate the significance of this National History for our country.”

“Exaggerate? Allow me to give some examples, so the jury can decide. The origins of dozens of customs, widely observed today, are revealed in this book. Many trace their genealogy back to names in here. Walk through our valley to observe place after place whose current name was first given in this history to commemorate a significant event. You will also see monuments which were erected to recall the heroic struggles described herein. Our yearly festivals and holy days were all inaugurated during events described here. Our years are counted from the very day the Tulars liberated us, and the number of days in a week was chosen by them. This book’s laws dictate how we do business, farm our land, eat our food, and conduct our worship. How many children have been named after the heroes in this book? Remove this book from our history, and we would be an utterly different people.”

The defense attorney glanced at the judge and decided to move on. “We don’t know who wrote half the portions of this book, and the authorship of the other half is in dispute.”

“The authorship of half is not in dispute except among men like you, and I will gladly let the jury decide who to trust. Granted, the authorship of the other half is unknown, but consider this. Do you care who it was that actually wrote down your parents’ will, the front page of the newspaper, or a country’s laws? No, because the credibility of those documents springs not from the one who held the pen, but from the institution that stands behind them. Likewise, the authority of this book arises from our nation’s founders as a whole, the forty thousand I mentioned.”

Pacing in front of the jury, the defense attorney turned to the prosecutor. “You’re basing everything on the assumption that the authors lived at the time of these events.”

“I am not assuming that,” answered the prosecutor. “Many of the authors claimed to be eyewitnesses.”

“So, you admit that isn’t true of them all.”

“Just because they don’t claim to be eyewitnesses doesn’t mean they were not. Either way, they wrote as if they had eyewitness accounts at their disposal, their own or others.”

“If they weren’t eyewitnesses themselves, we can’t trust them.”

The prosecutor said, “One of our people recently published a new biography about Governor Walkenship, who lived a hundred years ago. Do you think that book is historically unreliable just because it was not written by an eyewitness?”

“That’s a different situation.”

“I am glad to let the jury decide whether that is truly different.”

The defense attorney consulted his notebook again. “It is possible the authors composed these stories two generations later. In that case, the hearers lacked firsthand knowledge, and had no way of knowing whether the tales were true. In other words, clever story tellers embellished the original accounts and passed them off to a later generation. This removes your forty thousand witnesses.”

“What’s the chance that someone could pull that off?”

“It’s not as hard as you think. People love to believe colorful stories.”

“If it’s easy, would you demonstrate by role playing for the jury?”

“Well, I don’t think the judge would allow it.”

The judge said, “I will allow it.”

The defense attorney was allowed a few minutes to prepare. Meanwhile, the judge instructed the jury that they could also role play. The defense attorney began. “Listen, you people, to this true story about our fascinating past. Fifty years ago, our nation was liberated from our dictator by the Tulars, who had amazing powers. They set up a governor and laws, introduced new customs, and left us monuments like that one over there. I wrote it down in this new book.”

One of the jurors said, “Nice fable. I’ve never heard of the Tulars until today. The last dictator lived four hundred years ago. Our laws and customs haven’t changed in centuries. That monument was erected eight years ago.”

Another juror added, “I’m seventy-two years old, so I was there. None of what you told us is true.”

The judge remarked, “I thought you said later generations wouldn’t know whether these fables were true or not?”

“Sorry, Judge. Can I try again? This time the jury must start out believing our National History’s version except for these changes: The Tulars had a

much smaller role in our liberation, and they didn't set up our government, we did." The judge agreed.

"Listen, people, to this true story about our past. Fifty, uh, eighty years ago, our nation had a revolution. You think the Tulars only sold us a few arms to help out. Here's what really happened. The Tulars, who have amazing powers, played a much bigger role than you thought. I have discovered that they threw out our dictator, set up their own governor, and introduced new laws and customs, which we need to start practicing today. I wrote it down in this book."

A juror replied, "We already have a written history containing what really took place. Are you asking us to happily replace it with your new, contrary version?"

"If you don't mind," the defense attorney said.

Another juror said, "Do you think we can find and destroy every copy of the current history, hundreds all over the country, so this revision to our past is hidden from later generations? And we will have to erase everyone's memory, so they don't tell their children what really happened."

"Are you sure that's necessary?"

A third juror added, "After that, let's go to the capitol and convince our current representatives to abdicate, making room for the new Tular-endorsed governor. We will also have to create a false history of previous governors and plant it in documents all over the country, to dump this deception on later generations."

Finally a juror suggested, "Let's make a granite statue of the first mythical governor. We can glue moss to it so it looks two hundred years old."

The judge looked over to the defense attorney, "I try not to give advice to council, but out of mercy for your four defendants, I will make an exception. Go on to your next argument."

The defense attorney retreated to his table. "Thank you, your honor. Perhaps the storytellers and hearers knew these things were fictional but embraced it anyway for the good of later generations, to teach a moral lesson."

The prosecutor quipped, "What moral lesson would that be? Let's build our country on a colossal lie?"

"Well, doesn't this history read like something our fathers fabricated?"

The prosecutor stood up. "On the contrary, it has the clear ring of truth. Haven't you read how some of our fathers turned traitor on the Tulars, resulting in their shameful and violent deaths? Even the sins of some of the

loyalists are readily discussed. The Tulars are the heroes, not us. Furthermore, this book has many stories and laws which are difficult to stomach. Haven't you heard the saying that fiction is more agreeable because it is the world as we would like it, but truth is the world as it is? This book does not describe a history our ancestors would likely invent."

"Okay, maybe some of it happened, but the rest is lies."

The prosecutor moved to the front of the jury box. "Which parts are lies? Naturally, just the parts you don't agree with."

"You act like no one ever lies."

"Not on this scale, a nation knowingly inventing an entire history for itself, and not a flattering one."

"Not the whole history," suggested the defense.

"Then which parts?"

"Just the parts that I don't agree wi—Uh, I can't be sure because they're lying."

The prosecutor turned to the defense, "Where are the examples of dishonesty? Where are the alternate versions of the stories? What was to be gained by lying? Did anyone ever recant, or were they later exposed? Was there evidence of corruption, coercion or mental illness among the authors? You have yet to present a shred of evidence to support your accusation of widespread deception."

"These stories are unbelievable. They must have been lying."

The judge rose in his seat. "If you think you can discredit a witness merely by calling him a liar, you know nothing about our system of justice. This farce has gone on long enough. Give your closing arguments. The defense goes first."

The defense attorney addressed the jury. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. You have heard the large number of doubts and suspicions raised concerning the alleged accounts in our so called National History. The prosecution expects us to trust his witnesses. These events took place long ago. Therefore, it is impossible for him to prove that every author in every situation reported with perfect carefulness and honesty. There is ample room for you to doubt, and I ask you to find in favor of the defendants."

Next, the prosecuting attorney spoke. "I am reminded of the story of a jealous husband, whose wife behaved blamelessly. When she was out of her husband's sight a few hours each week, he was sure she was unfaithful, despite the absence of evidence. When she returned home, this suspicious man would beat her. When she asked why, he would say, 'You are well

behaved when I am around, but I'm sure you're doing what is shameful when no one is watching.' This is the entire basis for the argument of the defense. Whenever the testimony of my witnesses can be tested, it is consistently trustworthy. When it cannot be tested, the defense assumes infidelity. I will let the jury decide whether that has discredited them."

The judge gave instructions to the jury and dismissed them to deliberate. Then he addressed the four defendants. "I am obligated to remind you of this. When the Tulars were here, they promised to return one day. At that time they will share with us the magnificent blessings they enjoy in their far off land. We already tasted some of those at their first coming. The Tulars are benevolent but allow no mutiny. The good news is that they are just. All who are in submission to their duly established government will share in the blessings, but all who are in rebellion will be punished harshly. According to the Tulars' laws, I am offering amnesty. Any one of you who renounces his rebellion will be forgiven. Otherwise, even if the jury votes in your favor, you will face the powerful Tulars at their appearing."

One of the defendants asked, "What if we wait until their coming and repent at that time?"

"No!" warned the judge, "That will be too late. They clearly said that their coming will be sudden and unannounced, making it a true test of our ongoing loyalty. One morning, their armies will appear on the top of the hills to the east. All those not in submission at that very moment will be seen as enemies."

"It has been two hundred years. How do we know the Tulars even remember us?"

The judge explained, "Didn't you know that some of our people have been in regular contact with them ever since their first visit, even up until our day?" The judge dismissed the defendants and their attorney to a waiting room while the jury was in session.

While they waited in the room, one of the defendants, a deputy in charge of the police department, spoke up, "I am going to ask the judge for clemency. With all due respect to council, I don't anticipate the jury ruling in our favor."

The defense attorney remarked, "We all expect most of the jury to rule for the prosecution. But don't forget: it only takes one dissenter to create a hung jury. Our laws stipulate that if the jury cannot come to a unanimous

guilty verdict within three days, then the defendant goes free, without risk of retrial. I am confident you will get at least one juror on your side.”

The deputy asked the attorney, “Why do you think most of the jurors will vote against us?”

“Of course I would never say this to the jury, but the prosecution has a very strong case. Scores of witnesses, some of whom died for their testimony. That’s why I kept slinging as much mud as I could in hopes that some would stick, at least in the mind of one juror. All that’s needed is for one person to have a measure of doubt in that book, and you will be guilt free.”

The deputy turned to his co-defendants. “Do the rest of you think most of the jurors will vote against us?” They all three said yes, since they agreed that the prosecution has a strong case. The deputy exclaimed, “Then we are not safe even if we get a hung jury, because the Tulars will punish us.”

The Mayor mocked, “You don’t believe in that silliness, do you?”

The deputy answered, “A jury of twelve heard the evidence for the Tulars’ first visit. They know this is no light decision since our freedom is in their hands. You expect most to vote against us, which is tantamount to saying that the evidence supports the book. Even our attorney agrees. If you believe this is where the evidence points in the sober opinion of most people, how is it you are not afraid of the Tulars’ return?”

“I’m not worried,” said the Mayor. The other two said likewise.

The deputy asked one of them in particular, “Since you are so sure the things in our History did not happen, then tell me what actually did occur.”

He scoffed and said, “I have no idea. I wasn’t there.”

“But you are sure that certain events did not occur, events written down by those who *were* there. If you cannot see the absurdity of your position, then I do not know how to make you see.” The repentant deputy pounded on the door. When the officer came, he asked to see the judge.

Thirty minutes later, the deputy stood contritely before the judge. “Sir, I have seen the error of my ways. I have come to plead for the forgiveness of this court and accept the amnesty you so graciously offered. I expect the Tular people to return, as our most sacred book promises, and I intend to receive them without fault and with great joy.”

The judge instructed, “Bless you, young man, for your heartfelt remorse. If your repentance is genuine and you put yourself back under the government’s rule, then all your offenses against the state will be forgiven. However, you must continue in a state of obedience until the end of your life

or the time of the Tulars' return. If you stray again into the path of revolt, then this forgiveness will be recalled. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, your honor, and a thousand thanks for your mercy." The deputy was set free and assigned to work in a different village.

In the meantime, the jury attempted to work toward a consensus. Most were ready to cast a vote of guilty soon after they sat down. By the next day, everyone but one woman was in agreement. When pressed to justify her position, she could not give a valid reason to doubt the witnesses. They labored for two more days, but this woman's mind could not be changed. Until the end she kept saying, "I don't care what anyone says. I don't believe that book, and nothing will ever persuade me differently."

Three days elapsed and it was declared a hung jury. The judge called the three remaining defendants before his bench, read the verdict of not guilty, and let them go. They went on their way with great happiness, and scorned the other deputy who was missing out on the freedom they had won. The mayor and his two deputies returned to their village and ruled it according to their pleasure, without supervision from the governor's office.

One day in the future, the mayor awoke to the sound of tumult in the village. Hurriedly getting dressed, he rushed into the street where he saw someone pointing toward the east yelling, "Look!" Turning that direction, his heart was engulfed with terror as he saw an exceedingly large army on the crest of the hilltop. Filled with the blackest dread, he quickly departed for the capital city. Arriving at the courthouse, he saw the judge coming out the front door. He intended to fall at his feet and beg for mercy, but before he could get close, the judge ordered his guards to seize the mayor. They hurled him into the jail to await the verdict of the Tulars.

Meanwhile, in another village, the repentant deputy also awoke to the sound of uproar. Hurrying outside he followed everyone's gaze to the east. He was jubilant when he saw the Tular armies on the horizon. He felt immense relief for having made the right choice at the courthouse, when he didn't let the lure of a short lived freedom ensnare him. He was also glad that he had maintained his repentance from that time until this day.



David addressed the group. “This was a long story and there is much to discuss. We will do it Friday.”

As people were leaving, David asked Anna to go for a walk around the block. As they strolled down the sidewalk, David said, “What did you think of that last story?”

“That book doesn’t let you take a neutral position. Terror or ecstasy.”

“Sounds a lot like the Bible.”

Anna asked, “How much have you read so far?”

“I finished it last night.”

“Wow! What’s your impression of it?”

“It definitely did not match the rumors I heard all my life.”

“What did you think of the story tonight, David? You seem a little shaken.”

“I’m afraid of what’s coming Friday. This could be a turning point.”

“What’s so special about this story?”

“I’ve just read the Bible. If the stories in there happened as stated, it changes everything.” David stopped walking. “I thought I was the one chasing the truth, but now the truth is chasing me.”

Anna took a deep breath. “I’m fighting the same battle. My heels are dug into the ground, and I’m being pulled forward against my will.”

The next evening, Cooper was coming out of a store when he ran into the pastor of his old church.

“Cooper! What a pleasant surprise.”

“Hi, Pastor.”

“I haven’t seen you at church the past year. Are you attending somewhere else?”

“No.”

“We’d love to have you come back.”

“I don’t think so,” Cooper said. “Not after the way you and the leadership mishandled that situation with the youth pastor.”

“I see. So you still have hard feelings over that.”

“I could never be part of a church that made a mistake like that. And I’m not the only one who feels that way.”

“Cooper, there were many factors that went into our decision, factors that you and the congregation knew nothing about.”

“So you still won’t admit you made a mistake. Unbelievable!”

The pastor paused. “I can understand that you have a problem with our church, but why have you stopped going to church all together?”

“I haven’t found another church that’s good enough.”

“You mean good enough for you.”

Cooper’s voice rose. “You preachers think you can do whatever you want and we’re expected to meekly submit. I’ve had it with you.”

“Do you think we could sit down and ta—”

“I said I’ve had enough.” Cooper stormed down the sidewalk.

# CHAPTER 14

Friday

David got the meeting underway. “I expect a lively discussion tonight about Wednesday’s history story.”

Liz Did you notice how the prosecutor presented his case? Here are my witnesses. If you can’t show they’re unreliable, you must accept what they say. Does anyone agree?

Cooper No. If someone tells me something, and I can’t prove him wrong, that doesn’t mean I have to believe him.

Latisha So, you assume he is wrong? That’s strange.

Cooper No, I assume I don’t know yet.

Anna That’s fair for starters, but what if more and more people tell you the same thing, and you still can’t fault them, and you are hungry, and they tell you where the bread is. At some point it would be odd to remain on the fence.

Mary Like that juror who stood against the other eleven. She had one of those attitudes we covered in the earlier stories.

Elliot Not necessarily. You presume no faults can be found in the Bible.

Owen Bring ‘em on.

Tyler Gladly. The witnesses contradict each other and themselves. That’s a sure sign they can’t be trusted.

Karl We’ve already spent two evenings on this. Some people will never believe the Bible, like the lady juror. Accusing it of discrepancies is their lame excuse. I don’t want to waste any more time answering their silly objections. I’ve read lists of supposed contradictions and they’re nonsense, like the Masa story showed.

David We already voted to move on from that topic. What else?

Jose I counted at least twenty distinct arguments the defense attorney threw at the book. They all seemed weak, but it was tempting to be persuaded by the sheer number of them.

Sandra Just like in the discrepancies story. If a gifted speaker makes enough points, you're swayed to think some of them must be valid.

Geoff What about the accusation that they forgot by the time they wrote it down?

Although this was his first meeting, Perry leapt into the debate.

Perry People forget things all the time.

Geoff If you saw someone come back to life, you would never forget it.

Perry Maybe, but there are all these speeches and prayers in the Bible. Do you really believe someone got every word right when they wrote it down decades later?

Latisha Why assume it was written down decades later?

Perry I guess we don't know.

Latisha If an author wrote down a parable, I am willing to believe they remember what Jesus said.

Cooper That assumes they were honest and reliable.

Mary Start with that assumption until you can prove otherwise.

Cooper But people are dishonest and unreliable.

Mary All of them, all the time?

Cooper Of course not.

Mary Can't you tell the difference?

Jose Of course he can, but it's convenient to play the liar card when you don't want to believe something.

Cooper You don't believe this stuff either.

Jose We may be at a similar place, but we're going in opposite directions.

Karl How about the fact that the Bible is the only source for most of what it describes?

Anna That concerns me. Some of these events were spectacular. Why didn't anyone else write about them?

David That's bothered me too.

Paul You're asking why the Gentiles didn't report it?

Anna Yes.

- Paul Very little of it was seen by Gentiles. Writing was rare in those days. Maybe what they wrote was lost. Sometimes they had reasons, like Egypt not publishing the humiliating exodus. Can the only explanation for their silence be that it didn't occur?
- David You're right. We don't know how many Gentile witnesses saw each event, if any.
- Paul If any Gentiles did see it and wrote it down, it wasn't sacred scripture to them. They'd didn't have the same motivation as the Jews had to re-copy and preserve the record for centuries.
- Jose The story talked about myths. I've thought of the Bible that way.
- Mary I have too, but the story helped me see the difference. Myths are bedtime stories, but the Bible is history.
- Sandra Jose, why have you seen the Bible as myths?
- Jose Obviously, because of the miracles. In fact, that is the only reason. You caught me. I'm guilty of anti-miracle bias.
- Mary You're right. That is the only similarity between the Bible and myths, the supernatural element.
- Elliot Then why not believe in UFOs, Bigfoot, and flying monkeys?
- Paul Why? How many people construct buildings so they can teach their children about those things one day a week, or give ten percent of their income to those causes, or send missionaries around the world to tell others about them? They know the difference and so can you.
- Tyler Look, here's what happened. The Jews probable came out of Egypt and got into Palestine somehow. After a while they started to write it down and someone added miracles. It's that simple.
- Owen Why do you think they came out of Egypt?
- Tyler That's what their history says.
- Jose Why don't you doubt that too?
- Tyler It's not a miracle—Oh, I see. You think you've got me on the anti-supernatural thing. Okay, I doubt they came out of Egypt too.
- Mary Thank you, Tyler, for helping me see things more clearly.
- Tyler At least I'm making sense to someone.
- Mary You've helped me see how I've accepted everything else the Bible says and doubted only the miracles. That's biased.
- David Do you know how many miracles Moses is said to have done, and how dramatic they were?
- Mary Yes, but give me one reason to doubt what the author wrote.
- David Miracles seem so unlikely.

Paul How can you assign likelihood to the possibility of miracles? That's like picking the probability that the universe could exist.

Cooper He's got you, David. Who among us can calculate the probability of miracles existing?

Elliot I still think it's very unlikely.

Jose I don't think you were listening, Elliot. This time I agree with Cooper. You'd have to be God to know that kind of probability.

David All right, we have no idea what the likelihood of miracles is. So why do I think they didn't happen? Someone help me out here.

Liz How about the New Testament? That's on trial too. Maybe the church made up those stories about Jesus' miracles to give their movement a boost.

Latisha The whole church with thousands of members decided to believe an elaborate deception which they all knew to be untrue? I can assign a probability to that: zero.

Liz Not if it was the second generation. They wouldn't know.

Karl Sure they would. Think of a famous American who lived forty years ago. If I invent stories about him doing amazing miracles and rising from the dead, would a single one of you believe me?

Tyler Well, I might.

Elliot Oh come on, Tyler, you are the last person who'd believe.

Liz Okay, then they knew it was a lie, but chose to follow it anyway. According to the book, lots of people do that in other religions.

Sandra No, those in other religions are not knowingly believing a lie. They never saw their prophet do miracles. They only choose to believe their words.

Owen Liz, you sound like the defense attorney. Why are you bent on making the Jews devils or dimwits? Why not believe them?

Liz Good question.

Elliot First we're asked to accept that the Bible wasn't changed, and then that it has no discrepancies. Now we're told concede it all happened. Next there'll be another concession, and another. Don't you see where this is leading?

Liz What are you saying?

Elliot I won't keep giving ground until there's nothing left to give.

Liz But if it's the truth, what's wrong with giving ground? If you think the Jews were in error, give a convincing argument. I'm listening.

Elliot It's reads like a fairy tale.

Liz That's your reason?

Elliot That's enough for me.

Liz It's nothing like a fairy tale, but it is supernatural. Thank you, Elliot, for helping me see more clearly. Why should I doubt them? All you've got is the defense attorney's arguments.

Tyler Way to go, Elliot.

Elliot You should talk, Tyler.

David I'm still hanging in there with you guys, but your arguments aren't overwhelming me. Maybe the Jews added the accounts of miracles to their Scriptures in later generations.

Paul Two weeks ago you argued that there is zero evidence for the Jews altering their holy books over the past few millennium. Why do you suggest it now?

David Just exploring possibilities.

Owen How about the prophets? They predicted the exile to Babylon. If they had predicted this after that occurred, would the Jews have preserved their writings as the word of God?

David That does seem unlikely.

Sandra Listen, David. Every American believes we started using our Constitution in the late seventeen hundreds. You are suggesting that a clever charlatan introduced the Constitution one hundred years after that time. He erased the memories of the whole country, altered all previous documentation and artifacts, and from that time on everyone fell for his ruse. Believing that is beyond ridiculous.

Geoff The Jews and Christians have one history. Why are you straining so hard to invent an alternate one?

David Not all of it, just the mirac—. Someone help me.

Anna It's preposterous and paranoid to think that the Jews century after century kept adding to their scriptures what they knew to be a lie. The written accounts must have been introduced several generations after the events, so the readers wouldn't know it was a lie.

Geoff The gap couldn't have been several generations with the New Testament, and there is ample documentation to prove that.

Anna Okay, maybe I'll concede that, but it could have happened with the Old Testament.

Geoff That doesn't explain why they would accept a prophet who predicts what happened in the past. Everybody would know his writings appeared after the fact. The longer he waits, the harder it would be to fool anyone.

Anna I'll concede the prophets too.

Elliot You're giving ground by the truckload.

Anna We still have the history books. They could have been written or modified well after the fact, so only the authors would know they weren't true, but not the hearers.

Paul You mean, only the authors were liars, century after century.

David Maybe the authors also thought there was some truth to it.

Paul Where is the David Ruben who is zealous for the truth above everything else? Let's think this through. One: You claim to know that the Bible didn't happen quite like it's written. Two: You claim that those who read these books long ago believed them to be truthful. Otherwise, it would make the early Jews and Christians the perpetrators of the biggest hoax in the history of the world, a hoax they knowingly deceived their own children with. Do you agree?

David Agreed. As Anna said, it would be bizarre for them to embrace it as they did, if they knew it was a lie. Most of them must have believed it was true.

Paul Now listen carefully. They were much closer in time to these things than you are—within decades or a couple centuries at most compared to the thousands of years you are removed from it. They were also much closer than you in knowledge of the culture, language, and historical context. In short, they were in a far better position to pass judgment on these stories than you are. According to you, thousands of them believed these events were true when they read them. Here's the question: How is it you are right and they were all wrong?

All eyes fixed on David, who sat quietly for several seconds.

David They were a lot closer to the scene than I am, so how do I know what happened better than they did? Because people back then were simple-minded—ah, scratch that. Because I can't trust all of—no, not that. Because thousands of years later, we know better what happened than those who lived at that time. What am I saying? I'm a history teacher.

David kept thinking while everyone waited.

Hank David, look at those pillars of marble you built with your own hands. They prepared you for this moment. The Jews wrote down what they saw and heard. Why won't you believe them?

David looked over at the pillars.

David You're right. I don't have any reason to doubt them. It happened. It happened just as they wrote it down. All of it. Of course it did. How arrogant of me to think I know better than them.

Paul's eyes got really big.

David If no one else has anything to say, let's vote. I think everyone knows what we are voting on. Did it happen as written? A yes means it's all history. A no means part of it is made up.

Elliot, Tyler, and Cooper voted no. The other ten voted yes. It passed the three-fourths threshold. David made a stone named "History" and slowly laid it on the "Christian Proofs" pillar.

David Have a good weekend. I'll be going door-to-door again this Sunday. This will probably be the last time.

As people were leaving, David asked Anna, "Why did you vote yes?"

"I keep thinking about that mayor in the story. I don't want to end up like him, so I need to give Christianity a close look. Even so, I was still wavering until I saw which way you went at the end. I trust you."

Hank ran down Tyler as he was leaving the tent. "Tyler, what was that baloney with Karl's question?"

"What are you talking about?"

Hank got right in his face. "He asked if anyone would believe him if he invented a miracle story about a famous American. You said you would. You'll say anything to throw mud on the other side."

"Maybe I'm trying to stimulate healthy debate."

"Maybe you hate Christianity. Why are you here?" shouted Hank.

"Would you keep your voice down?"

"Too late. Your cover's blown. I was like you once. It took me fifty years to wake up to my stubborn and foolish ways. Take my advice. Don't wait that long."

The next day, Tyler made his third Saturday night visit to the Peterson mansion. He knocked on the mahogany door, but no one answered. Then he heard a voice calling, "Come in."

Tyler cracked the door and called, "Hello?"

A weak voice down the hall said, "Come in, Tyler. I'm in my bedroom." Tyler went to the master bedroom and found Mr. Peterson sitting up in bed.

"Excuse me for not coming to the door. I haven't felt well this week."

“If this is not a good time, I can come back.”

“A little talk will rejuvenate me. Sit down.” Tyler noticed an unusual color on Mr. Peterson’s face. “How have the meetings been going?” asked Mr. Peterson.

“Uh, have you heard anything?”

“No, I’ve been out of touch.”

“They’re not going too bad. There was a debate the other night about the historicity of the Bible.”

“It’s not a problem agreeing that some of the Bible is historical.”

“A few have started thinking all of it is,” Tyler said.

“We can’t have that. Leaves no wiggle room. Not to worry. This is easy to deal with. There are at least twenty theories one can dream up showing the Bible was partially fabricated. Since it happened long ago, no one can refute your theories. If somebody doesn’t accept one theory, try another. Since most people are inclined to disbelieve the Bible, you’ll soon hit on one that sounds plausible to them. Or else the sheer number of theories will persuade them.”

Tyler said, “What if some of the theories are just mud slinging?”

“We know the Bible couldn’t all be true. So it doesn’t matter what kind of argument we use to discredit it. Tyler, why are you talking like this? Are they starting to get to you? Anyone who says the entire Bible is historically accurate has a devious purpose or is a dimwit. Haven’t you come to that conclusion about your group?”

“Some of them seem okay.”

“Watch yourself,” warned Mr. Peterson. “I’m getting the impression they are making more progress than you’ve admitted. My best advice is to sling mud. Some of it will stick, and that is all you need to have a hung jury. You see, if even one person stubbornly refuses to believe, it poisons the rest with doubt. They start wondering, ‘If the facts are so convincing, why doesn’t everyone believe? Maybe I’m missing something.’ They forget that almost no one rejects Christ because of the facts. They reject him because of the dark demons in their heart like rebellion, greed, malice, envy, lust, deceit, arrogance, and folly. But enough of that. Here’s some mud to throw. Lump Christians together with every cult, kook, and heretic you can think of,” Peterson smirked, “People on the outside can’t tell the difference.”

“If I throw too much mud, they might get suspicious,” commented Tyler.

“Then switch to throwing words. Just keep talking about anything that’s remotely related: Church history, Bible translations, pop psychology. You obscure the real issues if you bury them with a mountain of words, never giving anyone a chance to get to the pertinent points. Above all, when attacking the Bible, don’t forget that lovely phrase ‘most scholars believe.’”

“But I don’t know what most scholars believe.”

“Doesn’t matter. No one ever checks the references. Another thing. It isn’t the character of Jesus that people have a problem with; it’s the character of his followers. Specifically, the ones who don’t obey him.”

“You mean his traitors.”

“Don’t call them traitors. Call them Christians. The more unchristian they behave, the more you call them Christians. It gives their faith a black eye. It helps that western civilization is supposedly Christian, because I like to blame every atrocity committed by the west in the last two thousand years on Christianity.

“You can also make fun of the Bible’s moral teachings that have fallen out of favor in our day. Makes it look unappealing, particularly to hedonists. All you need to do is point out the slightest blemish in the Bible and remind them that, if the Bible is from God, it must be perfect. With a book that large, it’s easy to find lots of things that appear to be flaws.”

Mr. Peterson stopped and put his hand on his head.

“Are you all right?”

“I’ll be fine. Now where was I? I lost my train of thought.”

“You were saying it’s easy to find apparent flaws.”

“Their own teachers will sometimes do it for you.” Mr. Peterson started to chuckle. “I get a kick out of the ridiculous theories that have come out of seminaries over the past one hundred and fifty years.”

“What theories?”

“Biblical scholars who dissect books of the Bible, questioning its authorship, dating, and transmission.” Mr. Peterson laughed louder now. “My favorite one is multiple authors for one book. They suggest an ancient editor spliced together two stories into one, taking a sentence from one and a sentence from the other. I bust a gut laughing when these fools say this editor did it out of *reverence* for the original text. These wolves in sheep’s clothing have done more to undermine the Christian faith than a thousand Mr. Petersons ever could. If I believed in a Devil, I’d have to say that was his masterpiece. It even spread to the Jews.”

“Are these wolves in all the churches?”

“By no means. There are seminaries and Bible colleges that haven’t been infected and pastors who won’t violate the Bible.”

Mr. Peterson slowly got up from his bed. “It’s time to quit. Let me show you to the door.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Don’t worry. Getting on my feet will do me good.” They slowly made it to the porch. “Did I ever tell you, Tyler, that I’m an elder in my church?”

Tyler raised his eyebrows.

“Don’t be shocked. Some churches are more progressive than others.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay getting back to your bedroom?”

“Don’t worry about me. Tomorrow I expect to be up and bounding around the house. I worked hard all my life so I could enjoy these golden years, and I’m not going to let anyone take them from me. Good night, Tyler. I’ll see you soon.”

Tyler unlocked his bicycle and pedaled slowly down the street, wondering about Mr. Peterson’s health. He looked awfully frail. He had worked hard all his life, but what was his reward? Watching his body waste away. What kind of golden years was that? In fifty years Tyler would be like him, barely able to walk, waiting to die. Tyler was glad no one could read his depressing thoughts. Then it occurred to him that Mr. Peterson was the same age as Hank, but that was the only thing they had in common.

Sunday after lunch, Hank appeared at David’s front door. They waited until quarter after one. “Looks like it’s only you and me, Hank. Are you nervous about knocking on the doors of strangers?”

“I was a salesman. This is child’s play.”

At the first house, David told the gentleman who answered the door, “We are conducting research. Would you tell us your opinion on the possibility of eternal life?”

“If you’re asking about the Bible, I don’t believe in that stuff.”

“Do you mind sharing why?” David asked.

“Sure. Part is historical, but the rest is made up, especially the miracles. It’s filled with discrepancies. The people copying it kept changing it to suit their tastes.”

“You forgot one,” Hank said with a bit of sarcasm.

“What’s that?”

“A small group of men picked which books go in the Bible, but they bungled it, badly.”

The man smiled. “I like it.”

David continued, “Did you discover this through your own study of the Bible and its background?”

“Nah, I heard it on the grape vine. I’ve never read the Bible. I think a bunch of scholars figured this out. I’m not interested in ancient history, so I let them do my thinking for me. They’re experts, so they wouldn’t make a mistake.”

The man added, “Most people don’t take the Bible seriously, even those who claim to believe it. I bet your research has shown you that.”

“Yes it has.”

“There you go. The majority have voted. How could most of us be wrong?” Shaking David’s hand, “I gotta run. Have fun. I’m glad you got your dad to do this with you.”

On the sidewalk Hank said, “Do I look Jewish?”

At the next place a woman said, “I believe in the Bible.”

“Which part?” David asked.

“All of it. Are you from that everlasting life group everyone’s talking about?”

“What have they been saying?”

“Good, bad, indifferent. Are you a cult?”

“Not yet,” teased Hank.

“It sounds neat what you guys are doing.”

“You said you believe the entire Bible,” David said. “Would you mind telling us what effect it’s had on your life?”

“Not much,” she answered.

“Do you attend a church?”

“Usually not.”

“Do you try to practice what the Bible teaches?”

“I usually don’t feel like it.”

“Do you believe in the second coming of Christ?”

“Of course,” she stated. “I said I believe in the Bible.”

“Do you think you’re ready to face Jesus when he returns?”

“Um, I guess so. Best of luck spreading the gospel.”

After she closed the door, Hank said, “Maybe we should have told her we’re not Christians.”

David knocked on another door and a kindly gentleman answered. “That’s an excellent question, and I’m qualified to answer it since I’m a pastor of a church here in town.”

David brightened up. “How interesting. Do you believe the entire Bible is true?”

“Absolutely,” he said with confidence.

“Do you put the Bible’s teachings into practice?”

The pastor began, “Let me explain the method I use when I preach in my church. I’ve taken a colored marker to my Bible and highlighted all the passages that talk about God’s grace, love and forgiveness, all the passages describing the good things God does for us, and all the passages promising rewards. I preach from those parts.”

David asked, “What’s in the passages you don’t highlight?”

“The warnings of God’s wrath and judgment and everything difficult God asks us to do, like turning from our sins and enduring suffering patiently. You have to be careful to only highlight the portion of a verse with a promise and leave out the part with the conditions. That way, everything is unconditional.”

“Does your congregation mind you doing this?”

“They don’t seem to notice. It appears I’m using the whole Bible, since there are so many verses to draw from. They prefer the message this way. It sure packs the church on Sunday. Long ago I decided to set the bar very low, so a lot more can be saved. All they have to do is say a prayer and really mean it.”

“Are you sure it works that way?” Hank asked.

“Sure it does. I’ve got hundreds of decisions for Christ to prove it.”

David asked, “Do you come right out and tell them you are favoring certain verses?”

“No, I can’t do that. I’d sound like a heretic. I ignore large portions of the Bible, and everybody is happy. Let me give you an example. Most of the Old Testament prophets have a few passages that promise forgiveness and blessing, although to find them you have to wade through chapters of disaster threatening the wicked. I use only those pleasant passages, so everybody thinks that even the prophets support my preaching.”

“What if someone asks about the warnings to the wicked?”

The pastor answered, “I tell them, ‘Those don’t apply to you because you’re saved.’ Works the same with Jesus’ teachings. I ignore his stern words and focus mostly on the soothing ones. At least I admit I’m doing it. A lot of those behind the pulpit do this and don’t realize it. They just copy

how other pastors preach. The congregation is partly to blame. After saddling the pastor with monthly payroll and facility expenses, how can they expect him to preach a hard message that risks sending tithe paying members to another church.

“Do you ever talk about the hard passages?”

“I touch on them once in a while so people don’t get suspicious, but at the end of my message I always neuter them with a grace verse.”

David looked at Hank with an expression that said: do you want to ask him or should I? Finally, Hank asked, “How do you think God feels about your method?”

The pastor quickly answered, “I can show you scores of highlighted verses about God’s grace and mercy. If I’m making a mistake, he’ll forgive me. I’ve got an appointment. Take care.”

As they left the pastor’s house, David turned to Hank and said, “Have you noticed an unusual frankness in people today?”

At another house, a thirtyish man answered their question with, “I used to go to church but I’m never going back. Not after what they did to me.”

David said tactfully, “Would you mind sharing what that was?”

“They kicked me out because I’m living with my girlfriend.”

“Good for them,” Hank said.

“Wait a minute, are you from that church? If you expect me to beg forgiveness, you can forget it!”

David said, “Believe me; we are not with any church. Let me ask you a hypothetical question. If you thought living with your girlfriend would keep you from gaining eternal life, would you move out?”

With a puzzled look the man said, “Eternal life? What are you talking about? I go to church ‘cause I like the worship music, and I feel like I’m doing something worthwhile. If they don’t want me around, fine. I can make friends elsewhere. And tell your puritan friend here that no church is gonna tell me what to do.”

As they approached the next house, David said, “I think this will be the last one. I’ve heard just about everything there is to hear under the sun.” When they asked their question, a middle-aged woman answered, “I’m sorry, but I won’t have time to answer your spiritual question. I’m leaving to see someone at the hospital.”

“I hope it isn’t serious,” David said with concern.

“I’m afraid it is. It’s my uncle. I’m here to check on his house. He had a stroke last night. He barely made it to the phone to call for help.”

“Will he be okay?”

“He’s in a coma.” Looking at David, she asked, “Since you’re a man of God, would you mind saying a quick prayer for him?”

David stammered, “Uh, sure. I can do it later.”

“I mean right now. Please?”

They were on the front porch and David glanced around to see if anyone was watching. By the time he looked back, the woman and Hank had already bowed their heads and closed their eyes. Several seconds of awkward silence passed as David struggled to force something out. Finally, Hank prayed, “Our Father in heaven, please show your great mercy to this dear woman’s uncle. Amen.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Hank explained, “I’m sorry, ma’am, about my friend here. He’s still trying to figure out who he’d be praying to.”

After a quizzical look, she said, “Well, it’s a shame you couldn’t meet my uncle. He would have enjoyed debating you about religion.”

Hank said, “We hope he gets better. May I ask you about this beautiful front door? What kind of wood is this?”

“Mahogany.”

# CHAPTER 15

Monday



## Claims

There was a business that fell on hard times. The management met to explore ways to turn things around. One suggested this and another that, but nothing showed promise. Then one of them put forward a proposal. “I heard of a man who has rejuvenated businesses like ours. It is claimed he can do amazing things. They call him the Champion. Perhaps he is available.”

Another added, “I have heard of this Champion also. He has quite the reputation.”

“What does he say he can do?”

“He claims he can do it all.”

“He doesn’t lack confidence. Anyone can boast. I want to hear from those who have worked with him, to see if his deeds match his words.”

“Agreed. Let’s visit other companies like ours and find out what they know about him.”

They put together a team and traveled to several firms. They talked to executives and employees at these businesses but were told, “This man never managed here.”

When they visited other companies, the workers said they knew nothing about this Champion but added, “We have some great ideas of our own on resurrecting a business.”

The team told them, “Thank you for the offer, but we are looking for someone who is familiar with the Champion.”

At other companies they heard this story, “There is one guy here who claims he has talked with this fellow. The rest of us never had any contact with this man you seek.”

The team exclaimed, “That’s it? Just one person?”

After visiting more places, the team said to each other, “This is inefficient. Before calling on any more firms, let’s find out first if the Champion has actually done something there. We need to talk to a business that really knows this guy.”

After making some inquiries, one of them reported, “I think I’ve found it.” The team made plans to visit this business.

When they arrived, the team was ushered into the executive conference room where the entire senior staff were waiting to meet them. The team told them, “It isn’t necessary for all of you to take time out of your busy day to meet with us.”

The president said, “It’s no bother at all. We understand that you wish to learn about the Champion and his work, and our company guidelines make it a priority to discuss this very subject. This guideline was given to us by the Champion, as were all our operating principles.”

“So your company was rebuilt by him?” asked the visiting team.

“Yes. We were at rock bottom, like all the firms he rescues, but he revived us. When we give you a tour of the business, keep in mind that everything you see has his hand in it. Our products, processes, sales strategy, employee relations—all these and more are examples of his excellent work.”

“Have any of you worked with him in person?” inquired the team.

“He was here for several months. Today, you will interview dozens of workers who apprenticed under him.”

The team asked, “Would you recommend him for our company?”

The executive staff smiled at each other, while the president said, “Today, you will talk to people with firsthand experience of the Champion, people who met him, heard his advice, and implemented his methods. When they talk of the Champion, you will hear tales of his wisdom, integrity, and kindness. They will gladly describe the high quality of his work. By the end of the day, you will have an answer to that question.”

“You certainly have the information we’ve been seeking,” said the team. “We may want to talk to other firms which the Champion has worked with. Do you know who they are?”

“Of course we do, since they are all part of our parent company.”

“How can it be,” asked the team, “that all the firms the Champion has rescued are part of one company?”

The president said, “Before he will work with any business, the Champion must first acquire it. He’s very strict about this condition. No exceptions.”



David Does anyone know why Cooper didn’t show up today? (No one spoke up.)

David I’ll call him later. What’s this story about?

Liz If we want to learn about God, talk to those who met him and worked with him. Those people are found in the Bible.

Anna That doesn’t mean the Bible really is about God.

Sandra The story is only pointing out that the Bible *claims* to tell us about God.

Jose That’s not a huge revelation to most of us.

Latisha Maybe not, but it’s an important point. Remember the story of Hans and his broken watch? The moral of that story was to never expect more from someone than what is claimed.

David Who are the businesses the team visited?

Karl They are religions or other potential saviors. Some make no claim to inform us about God, while others have only one guy who claims to know something about him. The last firm was the ancient Jews and Christians. They have all kinds of people who claim direct working knowledge of God. If you want to know the quality of his work, listen to them.

Owen It’s a similar message to what was in the religion stories, but with a different metaphor.

Elliot Wait a minute! We were searching for eternal life. When did we switch to searching for God?

David We didn’t switch. The book did.

Geoff Did anyone realistically think we were going to find eternal life without God?

Elliot We can’t assume anything.

Geoff That’s true, Elliot. However, the book is now taking us on the path of Christianity, and in that religion eternal life comes through God.

- Elliot I can live with that for now. How about you, Tyler?
- Tyler Whatever.
- Mary Does the Bible really say it's God's words?
- Paul The Bible uses phrases like, "Thus says the Lord" hundreds of times.
- Mary If I understood the moral of the story, the Bible doesn't just tell us about God, it exhibits his work.
- Sandra Talk is cheap. Other religious writings talk about what God could do. The Bible tells us what he *did*.
- David So ancient Israel is where God showed himself. At least the Bible claims this.
- Sandra Not just ancient Israel. Those businesses the Champion revived include every Christian whose life God rebuilt, even those living today. Sure there are fake Christians and dead churches, but it's not hard to find real ones. Interview them to learn about the Champion.
- Anna Other religions have stories about God and people he's helped.
- Paul They do. But as the story illustrated, Christianity can introduce you to far more satisfied customers than all other religions combined.
- Tyler I have to admit, Christianity does boast to be the warehouse of information about God.
- Jose Did Jesus really claim to be God?
- Geoff Yes he did, but the fact that his followers claimed he was God carries more weight.
- Jose How is that?
- Geoff Consider two men. The first stands on a soap box in the park saying, "I am God." The second doesn't, but a thousand people say he is. Who is more likely to be God?
- Jose The second man. Any crackpot can say, "I am God."
- David Apparently Jesus' life convinced his followers that he wasn't merely a man.
- Owen He said and did the things that only God would say and do. Besides his miracles, he said he would return and personally judge the whole world. No one ever saw him sin. He accepted worship and forgave sins. When he spoke, he never said, 'Thus says the Lord,' but would tell them, 'I say.'
- Elliot But other men have gotten people to say they are divine.

Paul True, but not on this scale, not even close. Those others got a small following that soon dwindled. Jesus has over a billion saying it, and the number keeps growing.

Mary Jesus' own mother and brothers believed he was God. Think about that. Thirty years in the same house. Not a single slip of the tongue or weak moment that showed he was flawed. Thirty years of perfection. It's like . . . I'm sorry, I'm getting a little dizzy.

Sandra Are you okay Mary?

Mary I'm okay. Someone else go ahead.

Elliot But does Christianity promise eternal life?

David Yes. I made sure to look for that when I read the Bible. It's hinted at in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament Jesus promised it plainly, as did his apostles.

Karl In the story they never interviewed the Champion, only those he had helped. Their reviews of him were glowing, and there were a lot of them.

Liz Everyone knows you trust user reviews more than what the manufacturer says. There are a lot of Christians giving glowing reviews. I guess we should listen to what they have to say.

Sandra Just make sure you're listening to those whom the Champion has actually worked with. You can tell by their fruit, i.e. results.

David made a stone called "Claims."

David We are voting only on whether the Bible claims to record the words and deeds of God. I'm assuming everyone in the covenant has been reading the Bible, and that you know what's in there.

The ballots were distributed and collected. Everyone voted yes.

As the meeting broke up, a woman marched up to David and Jose at the front of the tent. "Excuse me. Do you take complaints?"

David glanced at Jose with raised eyebrows. "What is it?"

"I've come several times. You people never get into the details. It's all attitudes and concepts. I'm looking for more than that."

David replied, "You're right about the details, but we don't have time for that here. I'm a teacher, and I expect my students to study outside of class."

Jose chimed in, "There are tons of books and other resources. Just start looking. I've been doing that for months, and I have a full time job, a wife, and two children."

"I was kind of hoping we could cover those things here."

David said, "You need to do the homework on your own."

After the woman left, David tracked down Sandra. “How’s Mary doing?” Sandra frowned. “Getting weaker. I’m surprised she’s still coming. That woman’s got tenacity.”

“Is someone taking care of her at home?”

“Yes. She’s a widow and her son lives out of state, so he took a leave of absence from his job and is staying with her. He brings her here and back, but he’s not interested in the meetings.”

“That’s too bad,” David said, “but it’s good he’s taking care of his mother. Everyone can see we are nearing the latter part of the book. I hope she hangs on a few more meetings.”

“So you still haven’t looked ahead in the book?” inquired Sandra.

“Not one page.”

When Sandra left, David found Karl. “I’m starting to think about God, that maybe he’s up there.”

Karl asked, “How does that feel?”

“Unnerving. You remember that morality story, with the guys in jail?”

“I remember you felt uneasy afterward.”

“According to Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, God’s not too happy when we misbehave.”

“What are you going to do?”

David said, “I don’t know yet. What about you?”

“I’m following you, but farther behind. Maybe you should talk to one of the Christians.”

“I might. Last Friday was a watershed. Once you accept the whole Bible is true, it seems there’s only one way to go. I’m like a man sliding downhill, grabbing anything to stop the slide.”

“Why are you grabbing?”

“Things are moving too fast for me.”

Karl reminded David, “You put yourself on this ride.”

“Yeah, but now I’m screaming for someone to slow it down.”

“Maybe you should take a break from it.”

“I can’t. Not now.”

The next day, David sat down in the Vanberth courtyard to eat his lunch. Evelyn walked by and spotted him. “David, do you mind if I join you for a minute?”

“Evelyn! Please sit down. We haven’t talked in a while.”

Evelyn pulled up a chair. She didn't have her usual smile. David asked, "Is everything okay?"

"David, you've done a wonderful job teaching at Vanberth, so please understand that what I'm about to say is for the benefit of your career."

David put down his yogurt.

"I'll get right to the point," Evelyn said. "It's the group that meets at your house. The school is concerned about its effect on our image."

David was puzzled. "I don't understand. Our school vision statement talks about having a passion for truth. Is there something wrong with my group seeking the truth?"

"You are getting a lot of attention, and rumors are flying around."

"I haven't seen anyone from the college administration at a meeting. Why don't they come and see what is really going on instead of relying on rumors."

"They don't have time for that. Parents are entrusting their children to us. Our image is everything."

David asked, "What exactly is the school concerned with?"

"There is a perception of exclusivism. People are saying your group calls some religions misleading. I'm sure you aren't that intolerant, but if people believe it, the school's reputation is tarnished."

"I see. What are they suggesting?"

"Canceling the group would be the best way to quell the rumors, but I know that is a lot to ask. If you were to issue a statement in the newspaper saying you embrace all faiths as equally valid, that would make a lot of people happy."

David stared at the horizon behind Evelyn. "And if I don't, what would happen?"

"I can't predict how the school management would react."

"Evelyn, what do you personally think about what we're doing?"

She looked around and lowered her voice. "I've always been active in my church, so I'm somewhat sympathetic with your spiritual quest."

"If you were me, what would you do?"

"I'd tell your people you're dropping out for career reasons. They will have to meet somewhere else. And I'd do it immediately. You've got a good thing going here at Vanberth. Why jeopardize it?"

David quickly threw the rest of his lunch into his bag and said tersely, "Thanks. Bye."

David left the courtyard in a huff. He headed straight for his supervisor's office, but when he got in front of the building, he stopped and sat down on a bench. *What am I doing? I've got to cool down. Now is not a good time to talk to anyone.* Just then, one of his students from last semester passed by. "Hi, Mr. Ruben. How's it going?"

"Hi, Craig."

"How are those meetings at your house going, you know, about heaven?"

"Fine. And for your information, I'm going to keep having them until I get the right answer, no matter what happens to me."

"Cool!" said Craig. "Do you know the whole town is talking about it?"

"What are they saying?"

"Uh, well, you know how it goes with rumors."

"That I do."

"But I admire how you're sticking your neck out to find the truth. You don't care what the school or the town says. I've heard students say they respect you for that."

David smiled. "Thank you, Craig. You have made my day."

## Wednesday

As people arrived, Karl commented to David, "We haven't played racquetball in months."

David said, "At the end of your life, what would you rather say, 'I played racquetball, or I found out how to live forever'?"

"You're too rational."

David asked the group, "Has anyone talked to Cooper? This is the second meeting in a row he's missed, and he's not returning my phone calls."

Owen said, "I'll stop by his apartment. I know where he lives."



## Proof

There once was a large city with a notorious slum near downtown. Children who ran away from home, or were abandoned, took refuge there. They barely survived by stealing food from adjacent neighborhoods at night.

The conditions in the slum were deplorable, but the government made no attempt to help the children. In addition, the city banned adults from entering the slum to keep crime to a minimum. Life was bitter for these impoverished children. Sickness was common, and so was vice. The environment alternated between anarchy and gang rule. Most of its inhabitants came to believe that life there was normal.

A few miles from the slum lived a man who was a Humanitarian. His heart was moved by the suffering of these children. Being a righteous man, he would not enter the slum in accordance with the city laws. Instead, he recruited youths to go there on his behalf, and they convinced a few lads to leave the slum and thrive under this man's care. The Humanitarian was wealthy, so he built a large estate for the rescued youths in a beautiful part of the city. Here they lived free of charge until adulthood. After each child was out of the slum for a while, he or she was sent back into it with a team to persuade others to leave. These teams brought food, clothing, and medicine as samples of their better life.

This went on for years and a trickle of children followed the teams to the Humanitarian's sanctuary. Unfortunately, some of those in the slum were hostile. They attacked the reformed youths who had been sent to help them, even murdering some. In spite of this, others continued to take their place since their conscience would not allow them to enjoy the estate while others suffered in the slum.

One day, a gang in the slum gathered in their hideout to debate the Humanitarian's work. The gang leader said, "These kids from the outside keep coming around, trying to get us to leave. I think it's a trap. Their gang wants our turf, and this is their way of tricking us. These kids say they work for some guy called the Humanitarian, but I've never seen an adult with them. I don't trust adults anyway."

A boy stood up and asked to be heard. "You think these youths are like us. In fact, there is far more to them than we know, and what they've done in our midst for years is the proof. You have all seen the lavish feasts they bring, with more food at one meal than we could steal in a month. Then there are the brand new clothes they offer us, far better than the rags we wear. Many times they brought some kind of healing drink that saves one of our own from the brink of death.

"But that isn't all. A couple years ago, one of our gang got caught stealing and the adults took him away. Everyone knows when that happens we never see that kid again. But these youths got him released. Don't you remember?"

He came back and told us in person. It was like he had been raised from the dead. Then he went to live with them.

“They also predict the future. I know several of you have heard them warn us of a coming storm, so we can take cover. And they are always right. They seem to know ahead of time when the city will be leaving food for us, so we can be the first to get it. Whenever they warn us not to go stealing, and we do it anyway, someone always gets caught.”

The leader said, “What’s your point?”

The boy exclaimed, “These youths have powers and knowledge far beyond ours. Maybe we should listen to them.”

“So they got lucky a couple times. What does that prove?”

The boy said, “Ask this fellow over here, who could barely see. One of these lads took him to the outside, and he returned with those things over his eyes. Now he sees perfectly. Was that a coincidence? I can list a great many of these miracles which you yourselves have seen year after year.”

The leader sneered, “So maybe they can do things no one around here can. What does that have to do with us?”

The boy continued, “These youths have repeatedly explained the purpose of these benefits. It’s not to make our life here a little easier. It’s so we listen to their message, trust them, and go live with them. I hold in my hand one of the maps they leave all over the place, showing the way to their home. If they only had our abilities, we could ignore them. However, the amazing powers they constantly demonstrate show that their home must be far better than ours.”

Someone else said, “But how do we know they can be trusted? They might use their powers to stab us in the back the minute we get there.”

“We know because they have always used their special abilities for our good. Even when we beat them up, they return and try to help us.”

The leader said, “What about this Humanitarian? According to them, everything comes from him, but none of us has ever seen him.”

The boy reasoned, “Where do you think these youths get their treasures? Who built their home? Who turned their lives around and put new clothes on their backs? Who keeps sending new ones after they grow up or we murder them? Does all this come from thin air? They claim to have seen him. This proves not only that the Humanitarian exists, but that he has both the power and intention to do us good and give us a life far superior to our present one. It proves this map leads to real treasure.”

One of the slum children said, “That home may be real, but I’m comfortable with my life here. I’d rather stick with what I know.”

The boy argued, “You don’t have that option. Everyone has heard what these outside youths say will soon take place. The city won’t tolerate this slum much longer and plans to burn this entire area to the ground without further warning. Anyone still living here will be consumed without mercy. The Humanitarian knows this day is getting closer, which is why the pleas of his messengers are getting more urgent.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said one of the gang, “I refuse to believe they would do that to our home. There’s nothing wrong with this place.”

“That is what you think, but the Humanitarian’s messengers say otherwise. Don’t forget that they have proven over and over to have knowledge of the city’s plans that we lack. We should believe them.”

Some of the gang were persuaded to flee the destruction of their slum and begin a new life in the Humanitarian’s spacious estate. But other’s refused to leave. Because they loved their lives of crime and the relative freedom of living in the slum, they doubted the warnings and proofs of the reformed youths. Since they had hardened their hearts to the love they were shown, they grew more and more hostile to the Humanitarian’s workers. One of their leaders said, “The next time they send one of their teams into our turf, let’s kill the leader and hang him on a tree. Then they’ll stop coming.”

At the same time, the Humanitarian was making plans of his own. “I want to show these lost children my vast resources and my personal desire to save them. Therefore, I will send a team with more treasures than ever before. I also want them to see my face, to know that I exist and to see what I look like. Since I cannot go, I will send someone who looks exactly like me. To lead this team, I will send my one and only Son, whom I dearly love.”



Liz (Wiping away tears.) He came for us. He didn’t leave us in the slum.

Jose Who?

Liz God. He didn’t forget about us.

Tyler Is that how you see this world, one big slum?

Owen Have you read a newspaper lately?

Tyler The world isn't perfect, but this is the way it is, and it's not all bad.

Liz Slummy life is normal in a slum, but don't you guys get it? Someone is calling us out of this cesspool to their mansion. Why fight it?

Jose If it's true, we shouldn't. But I need to make sure.

David Me too. I need proof, and proof is what this story is about. Who wants to summarize the moral?

Karl The Hebrew holy men proved they were sent from God by doing things humans can't do.

Mary The Bible's miracles prove God can back up his bold promises. They show power over nature, sickness, birth defects, and especially death.

Latisha That was the other part of the story with Hans and his broken watch. Don't go to someone for help unless they have a proven track record of fixing that type of problem.

Paul Other religions make promises, but don't bother asking for their portfolio.

Latisha A second moral of this story is God not only proves his abilities, but he proves his good intentions. That's what brought Liz's tears.

Ramon had sat in on a few meetings, but was still skeptical.

Ramon Say all you want. I don't believe those miracles happened.

David Why not?

Ramon I don't think miracles ever happen. Why are they only mentioned in ancient books?

Paul There are seventy people here tonight. Raise your hand if you personally know of a miracle happening in your lifetime. Not just coincidence, but something only the supernatural can explain. If you raise your hand, we might ask you to defend your claim.

Five people raised their hand.

David So much for your ancient books theory.

Ramon That doesn't prove anything.

David Why not?

Ramon If I quizzed them, I'd discover that their miracle was just good luck, or they're bending the truth to get me saved.

Jose That's the "They're all dimwits or liars" defense.

David Jose is right. You were presented with five people who claim evidence of a modern miracle, yet you waved them off in a split second, as if you could instantly peer into their souls and judge their abilities and motives, all without hearing a single word from their mouth. Is that reasonable?

Ramon had nothing to say.

Elliot Come on. Are you telling me no one has heard someone claim a miracle because they got five green lights in a row?

Latisha Everybody knows that plenty of miracle claims are bogus. But are all miracle claims bogus?

Mary Especially the Bible's.

Perry, who had voiced his skepticism at an earlier meeting, yelled from the crowd.

Perry I think the Bible's miracle stories can be explained by coincidence.

Jose Which ones?

Perry Um, I'm not sure. I haven't actually read the Bible.

Jose Aaargh!

Paul God's miraculous hand is still at work in his church today. If you spend enough time around genuine believers you will see it. I have.

Sandra So have I!

Mary What about the part where the slum was soon to be burned down? What was that supposed to represent?

Geoff The second coming of Christ.

Mary I thought that was supposed to be a wonderful event.

Paul Only for true disciples of Christ.

Karl Let's talk about predictions.

Jose How many can be chalked up to luck?

Sandra Most were clearly miraculous. Go read it for yourself.

Elliot There were false prophets back then.

Paul Right. And their message never made it into the Bible. Jeremiah predicted the fall of Jerusalem, the exile to Babylon, and their return seventy years later. When these came true, do you think it was hard for the Jews to figure out if he was sent by God?

Anna An earlier story said some of the Bible's predictions came true within hours and days. How is that proof for us? How do I know the prediction was made before the fulfillment?

Owen We know it happened in that order because the biblical writers tell us so. Those predictions weren't a proof for us; they were a proof for them. This was how they knew who was sent with God's message. They recorded some of the predictions and fulfillments for us, so we would know how it was proven to them.

Elliot That's fine, except it requires us to trust them.

Liz And your point is?

Elliot That works for you since you want to believe. I'm not so gullible.

Liz You're stubborn. We've been over this. You don't have one good reason to doubt what the Jews recorded.

Elliot No one here believes every story they hear from a stranger.

Paul This is not a stranger's story. It's the diary of a nation for two millennia. A diary you can still find prominently displayed at the front of every synagogue. Scores of men died rather than renounce their belief in these stories, men in perfect position to know whether it was true.

Elliot Eloquently said, but I still don't trust them.

Liz Aaargh!

Elliot That wasn't as eloquent.

David If someone wrote a book today predicting the Civil War, we would all know it was counterfeit. We wouldn't pick it as the basis of our government, culture, and religion. We're not a nation of simpletons, and neither were the Jews.

Henri thought now was a good time to use his knowledge of the Bible.

Henri Other religions don't stick their neck out like Christianity, making grandiose predictions that could easily discredit the messenger when they don't occur.

Karl An alleged proof for reincarnation is people remembering past lives. That's looking back into history, which any human can do. God proves himself by looking forward into history, which no human can do.

Jose Were there any predictions that could be a proof to us because their fulfillment was far enough in the future?

Henri Yes. Here are a few. Four thousand years ago, God promised Abraham that his name would become great, a promise that sat dormant for two thousand years. At the time of Christ, it's fulfillment began as the spread of the gospel made his name famous worldwide. And the same promise was made to King David, but to no one else. Egypt was a great power in the Middle East for two thousand years, and we still have the pyramids to prove it. Around five hundred B.C., a Hebrew prophet said Egypt would become a lowly nation for the rest of their history, and it happened. Another Hebrew prophet predicted that the great capital city of the Babylonian empire would be destroyed, never be reinhabited. Its ruins were recently found under the desert sand. The prophets never said this

about Rome or Athens. They did predict Jerusalem would be destroyed and then rebuilt, and it was. Jesus later predicted Jerusalem would be destroyed and trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, but only for a time, which also happened. They were never wrong.

David My synagogue never told me this stuff.

Henri I'm positive they never told you the following. Thirty-five centuries ago, Moses predicted the rebellion of the Jewish nation against their God, and the resulting consequences. He foresaw them living in a state of fear and oppression among the gentile nations. The history of the Jews over the past two thousand years chronicles the tragic fulfillment of what Moses accurately predicted long before it ever started.

Liz Those same prophets, and the apostles, and Jesus predicted eternal life in God's future kingdom. Their words can be trusted, just like the Humanitarian's youths.

Anna Liz, when did you become a preacher?

Liz I'm not preaching. I get it!

David Let's vote. Remember, we already voted on whether the Bible's events happened, so you in the covenant must accept they did. Tonight, we vote on whether you agree with this statement: The Bible contains many miracles and fulfilled predictions that prove who God spoke through, and what his powers and intentions are.

Two people voted no. A "Proof" stone was added.

David Thank you, everyone. See you Friday.

Liz Just a second. I've got something to do.

Liz got up from her seat and walked over to the wooden post by the pillars. She removed her necklace and hung it on the peg. Then she turned around with a big smile and gave everyone a bow. Many in the crowd clapped and cheered, while the rest watched in silence. Sandra went over to Liz and gave her a hug.

Afterward, Anna said to Sandra, "Liz will do anything to get David's attention."

"Are you implying she's faking?"

"Maybe not," admitted Anna, "But I'll be watching her."

Sandra found Paul and told him, "Anna just told me she thinks Liz did that to attract David."

Paul said sternly, "Why are you telling me this?"

"You're right. I'm gossiping. Sorry."

After most everybody left, David found Paul and asked if they could go inside to talk. “Paul, I have a personal question, but would you promise not to mention it to anyone else?”

“Absolutely, you have my word.”

David continued slowly, “I have a personal habit, which I think I would have to give up to become a Christian. Is that true, and what if it’s impossible to break this habit?”

Paul said, “With God, nothing is impossible. First you would need to determine if this habit is indeed sinful. If so, then it must be stopped, but God and his church will help you. He has already done this with millions before you. He did it for me. I used to have an awful addiction. It was so strong that I thought I’d never get over it. God delivered me, and now I wouldn’t go back to it if you held a gun to my head. He will do the same for you. And don’t worry; I’ll never breathe a word of this conversation to another soul.”

David felt hopeful. “So they aren’t just empty words in some old book.” Then he mentioned, “I know you will keep this confidential, but I was careless once and shared my bad habit with another guy after the meeting.”

Paul reassured David, “It’s very unlikely he’d tell anyone else. What would he have to gain from that?”

David said, “You’re probably right.”

# CHAPTER 16

## Friday

As David brought out the book, one of the covenant members said, “I don’t know how the rest of you feel, but I’m getting burnt out. It’s hard keeping an interest in these stories.”

David answered, “I’m worn out too, but we’ve got to hang in there. These stories are not for our amusement, and this is one race you don’t want to drop out of.”



## Unity

There once was a man who was a pioneer, an adventurer, and a builder. He was a visionary. One day, he set out to fulfill his ambitions. He sailed far across the ocean to a large island, which had previously belonged to his native land. Long ago this island had revolted and broken away, and its inhabitants had declined into a primitive race. The island had no suitable bay for his large vessel, so the sailors ferried his supplies to land in small boats. A few of the locals watched this strange sight from behind the trees. After he gave his men instructions on when to return, they left him alone on the island.

At once, the man selected a prime location on which to build, and then made acquaintance with the natives. He quickly identified a reliable family patriarch whose name was Andrew. The man told Andrew, “I am going to build a castle on your island, and I want to employ your family and their descendants to do the work.”

The man pulled out a contract which he had written long ago, back in his homeland. "This will be the terms under which you will work for me. You will find me equitable and generous, and your reward will be very great. Furthermore, the whole island will one day be enriched through you and your sons. Your extended family can live in the castle, provided they keep the terms of this contract; otherwise they will be thrown out. The contract terms are non-negotiable."

Andrew saw the man's supplies on the beach and could tell he was vastly superior to anyone on the island. He agreed to the contract. They marked the covenant with their own blood, as was the custom. The man told Andrew to call him the Architect.

Without delay, Andrew and his sons set to work building a castle, following the Architect's blueprint and using the advanced tools he supplied. Those who worked for him found the Architect to be fair, wise and kind. He was also a pure man, having no vices. From time to time, he would share veiled promises concerning his future plans. Over time they came to see the unchanging nature of his character and purpose.

Soon the castle grew large enough for Andrew's family to move in. They did this gladly since the castle was far better than any dwelling on the island. Because the Islanders only lived a few decades, Andrew and his sons passed on, and his descendants took their place. The Architect, however, came from a unique race whose members lived a vast number of years. On occasion, islanders who were not sons of Andrew asked to help with the work. The Architect welcomed these and allowed them to live in the castle.

Not every son of Andrew was faithful to the covenant. They refused to work on the castle and treated their family members badly. When he was away, the Architect appointed dependable messengers whose job it was to remind the sons of Andrew about the contract. He also appointed others to deliver them from their enemies, and others to rule over them. The messengers warned the rebellious to reform their ways, lest the owner of the castle deal with them according to their deeds.

Some heeded the messengers, but others mistreated them. When the Architect returned from his travels, he would judge his people. The wayward were chastised, while the continually defiant were banished from the castle, but the trustworthy were rewarded. Those who had done wrong could be reinstated, if their repentance was genuine.

After many decades, the Architect began to reveal his plans in greater detail. One day the castle would be much grander, and from it the Architect would rule not just the descendants of Andrew but the entire island. This new realm would be the home of virtue, harmony, prosperity, long life, and glory. The sons of Andrew who trusted the Architect looked forward to that day. The islanders outside the castle did not know of these promises or the ways of the Architect, since they had never lived with him. The Architect promised that one day the whole island would hear of him and his magnificent plans.

The Architect also revealed the cornerstone of the future castle—the chosen one. This eminently qualified man would come from the sons of Andrew, but he would be greater and unique. The chosen one would build a new castle, and from it he would rule over the island in righteousness and peace forever.

In spite of these promises, many sons of Andrew refused to honor the covenant. Messengers were sent to these evildoers again and again, calling them to leave their errant ways, but the messengers were beaten or put to death. Finally, the behavior at the castle became so decadent that the Architect cast everyone out. They lived as lowly serfs among the islanders for seven years while the castle lay empty, until their Master took pity and allowed them to return. Many never did return, and they spread throughout the island. Even after this chastisement, some served him outwardly but not with their whole heart. Meanwhile, the Architect's faithful servants continued to predict a great future, when the just would enjoy forever the Architect's island, but the depraved would be cast out, never to return.

One hundred sixty years after the Architect first arrived, he left on his great ship, taking one of the daughters of Andrew with him. During the next forty years, he was not seen on the island, and neither were any of his messengers.

After the forty years, the Architect's ship appeared on the horizon. A small boat put out from the ship. When it landed, a young man set foot on the beach and went straight to live in the Castle. After a time, he began to tell the sons of Andrew of his plans, how he was sent by the Architect to build him a better castle, using the foundation already laid. This irked some of them since they were quite attached to the old one. What amazed the sons of Andrew was how this man spoke as if he owned the present castle. He also talked as if he knew the Architect personally. He quickly recruited faithful men from the sons of Andrew to build the new castle, which was not to

be made of stone and wood. He began construction by teaching his followers the way of holiness and love, and he told them to call him the Builder.

The Builder announced that he was fulfilling the plans revealed by the Architect's heralds in previous generations. Those who had been waiting for this were delighted, but the rest were curious, indifferent, or hostile. The Builder demonstrated astonishing powers and knew the future with certainty. Those who worked with him found him to be fair, wise and kind, precisely like the Architect. He predicted a future kingdom of peace, where he would rule over the whole island forever. He initiated a new covenant with his servants, requiring complete loyalty to him. Those who kept the agreement would reap eternal rewards. Those who did not would be thrown not only out of the castle but off the island and into the sea. This new covenant would be ratified by blood, the Builder's own blood.

There was a son of Andrew who was advanced in age. He had known the Architect when he had been on the island years before. This elderly man had been watching the Builder for some time and finally approached him. "From your physical appearance you are obviously a son of Andrew. But I have been watching you closely and now am convinced that the Architect is your Father and you are his Son. You arrived like him and prefer the same people as him, yet like him you also welcome those who are not sons of Andrew. You look, act, and speak like him. You fulfill the roles of all the messengers, deliverers and rulers he appointed, but are greater than the greatest of them. You have his powers and his virtues. You have never repudiated a single word he said, but in every way have continued his passion to build a home for his faithful ones. You embody his mercy, holiness, and justice. Of you, it can be said that the Son is in every way like the Father."

The old man continued. "Yet you are more than just the Son of the Architect. You are the chosen one that the Architect's messengers predicted. Everything you have done is in harmony with what they proclaimed, as is everything you have promised to yet do. Truly, the eternal kingdom of your Father is being planted here by you, a kingdom which will grow until it fills the entire island."

Soon afterward, there came yet another confirmation that the Builder was sent by the Architect. The Builder was rejected and put to death by the leadership of the Castle, enduring the same hostility as the Architect's previous messengers. However, the Builder's servants immediately began spreading his message beyond the castle to the whole island, as the Architect's

messengers had predicted long ago. They proclaimed that the Builder was alive, though he wasn't currently on the island. He was ready to forgive and receive those who trusted in him, both from the sons of Andrew and all the Islanders.

So began the fulfillment of the promise that the Architect first made to Andrew, that through him the whole island would be blessed. Soon after these things, the old Castle was torn down by one of the Island tribes. But the Builder's new castle continued to expand in the hearts and lives of many Islanders, preparing them for the glorious day when an armada of ships carrying the Architect and his Son would appear on the horizon.



Jose     What do you think, David? Is the Son just like the Father?

David    I don't know. I was a secular Jew.

Paul     The story was a summary of the Bible, highlighting how the new covenant, or testament, is like the old, but better.

Karl     Did you notice how the Architect's plans were revealed in stages?

Latisha  It's like first viewing a picture from far away. As you walk toward it, the details get clearer.

Sandra  As you draw nearer to the picture, you don't expect major changes. That's what we see in the Bible. As the story progresses, it's the same message only clearer. Hence the title "Unity."

Elliot   I see differences.

Paul     So do I. Parents deal with their child differently when they are two, twelve and twenty-two, but it's the same parents with the same goals. The Bible has a rich variety of stories, but God's purpose stays the same.

Liz      And what is that purpose?

Sandra  To live in a paradise with sons and daughters who are holy and loving like him. And he will. No one can stop him. The only remaining question is, which of us will be in his family?

Mary     The story implied that Jesus' words and deeds closely paralleled the Old Testament. Is that true?

Owen    The story gave a few examples, but books could be filled with the ways in which the ministry, message and purpose of Jesus and his disciples mirrored the Old Testament.

Aaron was a Jewish man who had come to the meeting out of curiosity.

Aaron I've heard that before. Obviously, whoever wrote the New Testament slanted it to fabricate those similarities.

Geoff So if someone actually lived the life described by the gospels, he would probably be the Messiah.

Aaron I guess so, but no one actually did.

David Why do you think the gospels were fabricated?

Aaron Come on, nobody could do all that stuff.

David Many Old Testament stories are just as supernatural.

Aaron I don't think those happened either.

David So even you, a sceptic and secular Jew, see the similarity between the Jesus of the Gospels and the Old Testament.

Mary We haven't talked about the differences between Judaism and Christianity.

Tyler The Jews don't believe Jesus was their promised Messiah, but the Christians do.

Paul Many see Christians and Jews as followers of different faiths who only disagree on Jesus. This is not the Old Testament perspective. During the history of Israel, there were always Jews who hated God and Jews who loved him. When Jesus appeared, the Jews who loved God recognized Jesus because the Son is like the Father, as the story depicted. And as you would expect, the Jews who hated God murdered the Son.

Anna That's a strong accusation.

Paul It's in the Bible. Go read it. Likewise today, non-Christian Jews have chosen to either ignore or despise the Son, who was sent by the God of Abraham. This makes them enemies of God.

Elliot Enemies of God? The Jews in Jesus' time were very devoted to their faith, and many still are today.

Sandra That devotion is to Jewish rituals, distorted by men's additions. They have little regard for God himself.

Anna David, do you agree?

David She might be right. Many of the Jews I've known are passionate about Jewish cultural practices, but God is far from their thoughts. Others are secular, essentially atheists. You won't find them studying the Jewish scriptures in earnest to learn what God asks of them. Their approach to religion is like a lot of people's, indifferent or misguided. They have no fear of God.

Jose Some people say the Old Testament is all about wrath and the New Testament is all about mercy.

Sitting in the crowd was Wayne, a pastor from an Ashbow church.

Wayne It only seems that way because so many Christians, and preachers, selectively focus on the mercy verses in the New Testament. The truth is, both wrath and mercy are found throughout the Bible.

Owen Are you sure about that?

Wayne Do this: carefully read each book of the Bible without preconceptions, jotting down the one or two main points from each chapter, or section. When you're done, consolidate your notes to one page. You will find that the Bible is consistent throughout, and there will be surprises.

Tyler Are you kidding? That could take months.

David And you're point is?

Jose (Grinning.) What he really meant to say is, he'll get right on it.

Liz What surprises?

Wayne Favorite doctrines will barely be mentioned or totally absent. Other topics you rarely hear in church will be stressed repeatedly.

Anna Like what?

Wayne I don't want to ruin the surprise. You need to do it yourself.

Owen I don't need to bother with that. I already know what it says.

Liz Paul, can you explain the Jewish laws like kosher food? Do we have to keep them?

Paul As the Architect story showed, God made a covenant, or testament, with the Jews, which included the Mosaic laws. Jesus replaced that covenant with a new one based on obeying what he and his apostles taught, not Moses. This new covenant is for both Jew and Gentile, and it still requires holy and loving behavior like the old one. Morally neutral parts of the old covenant are not continued in the new such as laws covering food, farming and clothing, and observing special days, months, years and festivals. The animal sacrifices were replaced by Jesus' death and worship from the heart. Also removed were the temple, the physical land of Israel and descent from Abraham.

Mary Since we are asking questions, can someone explain what faith is, and how it fits with reason?

Karl I'll try. A family went on vacation. Their ten year old son didn't know what roads they'd take, where they'd sleep, or where the money would come from. He didn't need to know because his dad

handled that. The boy trusted his dad and had a marvelous vacation. People use this kind of faith every day with success. It needs two parties, the one trusting and the one being trusted. The only way we could operate without faith would be if we were omniscient. Since we aren't, we depend on others for the gaps in our knowledge. Faith is assurance of the future, using information from the past. The boy was confident he would have a roof over his head while on vacation because of the faithfulness his dad had shown in the past. Therefore, faith is based on reason and evidence. I choose to trust this person to keep his promise tomorrow because of what I've seen him do in the past. Faith fails when one of the two parties doesn't hold up their end.

Mary Then what is doubt?

Liz Stubbornly refusing to trust someone who has earned your trust.

Anna I'd like to get back to the story. It implied the Bible is the unified story of one God and his Son, working over a long time to accomplish one ultimate purpose. Let's test this. A lot of you know the Bible better than I do. Can anyone under this tent show me where that is not true, where the God of the Bible turned and went in a totally different direction? Don't waste our time with trivial or superficial differences. I want a major shift in direction.

No one spoke up.

David This is a good time to vote. The question we are voting on is what Anna just described: Is the Bible a continuous history of one God working the same plan?

One voted no, the other eleven voted yes. David added a stone labeled "Unity" to the latest pillar.

Someone yelled from the back of the tent asking if they would still be meeting next Monday since it was Memorial Day.

David Does anyone in the covenant want to take Monday off? (No one said a word.) See you Monday.

When most had left, David asked Paul if he could speak with him again. "Paul, I think I'm one of those Jews the Old Testament talks about, the ones God was not happy with."

"When did you start believing there was a God?"

"I'm still not a hundred percent sure."

"What's holding you back?"

David confessed, "Everything is moving too fast. What do you suggest?"

Paul said, “You are worried that you might not be right with God. That is a huge first step in the right direction. I’m going to send you to someone who can take care of that problem. His name is Jesus. My Dad first sent me to the Savior when I was a lad. It’s the best thing a father could ever do for a son. I consider myself extremely fortunate, because not everyone has a dad who will do that.”

David cried, “What did you just say?”

“I said not everyone has a dad who—”

“Never mind. I heard you the first time.”

On the weekend, Anna visited her parents. Since it was a holiday weekend, her two older siblings and their families were there for a big Sunday dinner, along with a couple cousins.

After the meal they were chatting, and her brother said, “Have you heard about that religious group in Ashbow that meets in some guys backyard?”

Anna squirmed. *Oh no! I was hoping that would not come up.*

Her Mom said excitedly, “Did you know Anna is going there?”

Her two siblings and the cousins stared at Anna. There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

“Well?”

Anna stuttered, “I’ve gone a few times.”

“And?”

“Not much to say. We talk about different things.”

“Are you getting religious on us?” teased her older sister.

Anna was desperately thinking of a tactful way to change the subject, “No. No. It’s just a way to meet new people.”

A cousin said, “I heard it’s run by a Jewish group. Are you interested in Judaism, Anna?”

“Of course not. There’s just one Jewish guy, uh, maybe a couple others.”

Her older brother laughed, “You in a prayer shawl. That would be hilarious. So what have you learned?”

Anna feared her face was getting red, “Um, we talk about different religions, and you know, the Bible.”

Anna’s father saw how uncomfortable she was, so he spoke up and changed the subject.

Anna stepped into the backyard for some fresh air. *What was I thinking? I don’t have the courage to do this.* David and her new friends in the group suddenly seemed unreal, like a fairy tale.

## Monday

David announced, “This is the fourth meeting in a row that Cooper has missed. Owen, did you catch him at home? Is he sick?”

“Yes I did, over the weekend. He won’t be coming back.”

David shrieked, “Why? What happened?”

“He’s not sick. He didn’t want to say much, but his attitude was sour.”

Sandra asked, “Was it something we did?”

Owen replied, “I don’t know. I doubt it. I think he’s soured on his faith.”

“Oh no!” cried Sandra.

David said, “He’s broken the covenant. I motion that he be removed. Anyone opposed?” No one spoke up.

David lamented, “That’s a tough blow. He was with us from early on. It makes me appreciate every one of you who is still coming. Your faithfulness has been superb. Let’s go to the story.”



## Fruit

Many years ago, there was a great empire with colonies all over the world. One of its territories was a large island, which had been made into a prison colony. The worst criminals from all over the empire were banished there for the rest of their lives. One year, the empire decided to grant this colony their independence. A new government was installed, to be run by a Prime Minister. This new leader was determined to transform the island from a land of felons to a nation of law-abiding citizens. The Prime Minister hand-picked an experienced and capable Warden to oversee the rehabilitation of the country’s inhabitants. The new Warden laid out a strategy for reform and announced his plans to one and all. The former prison colony was still infected with a criminal mindset, and the Prime Minister and Warden knew that genuine change would take years, for those who were willing.

Some years later on this island, a former convict named Jamil heard about the Warden’s program, and mentioned to his friend that he was thinking of signing up. He asked his friend to join him, but he showed no interest. Jamil told him, “The Warden promises dramatic results. You know how decadent our country is. This seems like just what we need.”

The friend replied, “Granted, this place has its defects, but I’ve gotten used to it. I’ll pass.”

“Haven’t you heard what our Prime Minister has been saying for years? Someday soon, he will expel those who still cling to their delinquent past. With no country and a criminal record, where would we go? The Warden is the only one the Prime Minister has appointed to clean us up.”

“I doubt the Warden is able to reform anyone to the extent that he boasts. Besides, no one’s going to throw us off the island because of a few moral lapses.”

Jamil had his doubts too, but he was unwilling to ignore the Prime Minister’s warnings. He decided to travel to an area with a high concentration of those the Warden had worked with. Jamil planned to interrogate them and know whether they had experienced the promised improvements.

When Jamil arrived, he found an official who was well acquainted with the Warden’s rehabilitation program. The official explained how it works. “We all know our Prime Minister’s vision, to turn this den of thieves into a righteous nation. The purpose of this program is to make that vision a reality. When you join the Warden’s team, you are assigned a Trainer who will work with you day and night. If you cooperate with this Trainer and follow the Warden’s instructions, then we guarantee impressive results. You will be made into a new man.

“What does the Trainer do?”

“He teaches, leads, empowers, convicts and purifies you. He assigns your work duties and distributes miraculous gifts to use in serving your fellow man. He produces in you love, joy, and peace. His presence marks you as one of the Warden’s apprentices, and he makes you fit for citizenship in the Prime Minister’s new nation. Do you see why many are eager to accept the Warden’s gracious offer?”

“Yes,” agreed Jamil, “It sounds delightful, but I have traveled far to learn this one thing. Does this tree produce good fruit? Do the trainees actually exhibit these results?”

“I could answer that myself, but I assume you prefer hearing it from their own lips.”

“You are correct.”

The gentleman led Jamil to a room with a table and a large bookcase crammed with books. “Here they are.”

“The table is bare. Where is the list of references?”

The gentleman pointed to the bookshelf. “Those are the references.”

Jamil drew back in astonishment. “Are those the documented results? How could I ever read all of that?”

The gentleman laughed, “Those are only their names and addresses. You will have to speak to them directly for their testimony. Pick any one of these millions of names. All are faithful to the Warden and exhibit the fruit of the Trainer’s schooling.” Jamil wrote down the names of some who lived nearby and called upon them one by one.

The first one told Jamil how he had been delivered from shameful and destructive behavior with the Trainer’s assistance. Another described answers to prayers that the Trainer had led her to say. The next one explained how the Trainer continually reminded her of the Warden’s promises and instructions, resulting in obedience. Still another gladly told Jamil how the Trainer had worked through him to heal a fellow trainee’s sickness, and also assist with their practical needs.

And so it went, as Jamil heard one after another describe stories of supernatural guidance, conviction of sin, gifts of wisdom, and increases in kindness, faithfulness, self-control, and holiness. A recurring theme was love. Every trainee experienced an increase in love for the Warden, Prime Minister, and their neighbor. Whenever anyone enlisted, the Trainer began to put in them a kinship with other trainees. Many also described how the Trainer would send them to tell others about the Prime Minister’s offer.

When Jamil had heard more than enough, he sat down to ponder it in the city square. Another man came by and sat down to talk with him. After listening to Jamil’s glowing report, this man said, “Let me take you to some other homes and introduce you to those people. When you examine their lives, you will see none of the effects that you just described. They have neither love, holiness, nor power. Yet they each claim to be one of the Prime Minister’s ‘new citizens,’ and they spout the same terminology as the people you just visited. They meet together once a week to assure each other that the Warden is pleased with them. Furthermore, their numbers are large. Doesn’t their existence disprove the Warden’s claims? This is why I have not joined his program, since it is filled with such hypocrites.”

Jamil replied, “I do not see how these fraudulent trainees cancel the testimonies of the good people I just interviewed. By your own description, they do not follow the Warden because they show no evidence of his Trainer’s coaching. The Warden himself warned us that there will be false trainees who profess his name but have never met him or the Trainer. For if

the fruit is not present, then neither is the Trainer. They deceive themselves if they think they will be allowed into the renewed nation when it is revealed. My council to them would be this: repent and come under the Warden's tutelage, so that his Trainer can bring forth the virtue required by the Prime Minister. As for you, my friend, you have stated that it is these fakes who keep you from the Warden. Why would you let the reckless choices of fools decide your eternal destiny? The sensible man takes his guidance from the wise."

Another man sitting nearby had overheard them. When the first man left, he said to Jamil, "These people whom you interviewed boast of the Trainer's supernatural abilities, but I have every reason to doubt what they say."

Jamil asked, "Why do you doubt them?"

"Because I have heard some of them playing fast and loose with the truth."

"So you will doubt all men forevermore?"

"Certainly not," the man said, "I will only doubt all of the Warden's trainees forevermore."

Jamil argued, "That is irrational. Why don't you come with me, and we will spend some time with them. You will be convinced of the authenticity of the Trainer and his handiwork."

The man insisted, "I do not wish to spend time with them. I have judged them from a distance, and I am sure that my judgment is without error. Besides, I have spent time with the hypocrites you spoke of earlier, and I have decided that all trainees are like them."

Jamil said, "You are playing fast and loose with your soul."

Then Jamil met another man sitting alone in the square, who said that he was a trainee. When Jamil asked if he knew any of the people he had just interviewed, the man said, "No. I keep to myself and don't associate with other trainees. I don't agree with some of the things they do and say."

Jamil explained, "When someone swears allegiance to the Warden, he becomes part of his team, and the Trainer grows in that person a love for his fellow team members. Because you keep away from them, it is clear that the Trainer is not your coach, and therefore you do not know the Warden. When you shun those he loves, you shun him, and when you shun him, you shun the one who appointed him, the Prime Minister. I urge you to go and make peace with the Warden and embrace his trainees with forgiveness, humility, and love."

After this, Jamil went straight to the Warden and made his own peace with him. The Warden accepted him with gladness and assigned the Trainer to be with him always. Jamil journeyed back to his hometown with great rejoicing. Even while he was on the way, he began to experience the new life that the Trainer produces. Once he arrived home, he immediately sought the companionship of others who knew the Warden and his Trainer.



Paul Before we start discussing this story, has everyone noticed the progression in recent stories? Starting with the History story, the hero has been introduced with increasing clarity. This last story had the whole Trinity. And, have you also noticed that most of the recent stories included an end of the world subplot?

David Thanks Paul. So, what's the moral of this story?

Latisha Will this tree bear fruit as advertised?

Jose In other words, does it work?

David Why is that important?

Anna Because the Bible promises impressive results for its followers, not just in the afterlife, but right now. If we don't see this anywhere, that's a serious blow to the Bible's credibility.

Karl The story implied that the Trainer, the Holy Spirit I presume, is supernaturally changing lives in millions of Christians. Is that true?

Paul Yes!

Sandra Yes!

Several from the crowd shouted, "Yes!"

Elliot This is happening in millions of Christians? How is it the rest of us never hear about it?

Paul Here's all you've got to do. Find a group of genuine Christians, not fake ones like the story talked about, and ask them to tell you what God has done in their lives.

Tyler Ask Christians to preach to me? You have got to be kidding!

Owen There's your answer. You don't want to hear it. Jamil did.

Elliot You do have a point there.

Sandra The skeptic stands at a distance saying, "There is no evidence that God is at work in this world." Believers say, "Come over here. God is at work in our midst." The skeptic keeps his distance and

protests, “Why should I trust you? I’m staying over here.” Yet some do come over and begin experiencing the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the Trainer. Our message to the unbeliever is, “Come and see. We aren’t making this up.”

- Liz She’s right. It’s already started with me. Why won’t you believe us?
- David I believe you, Liz. I just need to make sure. This is a big leap.
- Elliot As usual, the story anticipated my objections.
- Geoff Like what?
- Elliot Hypocrites. Those who prefer looking good over being good.
- Tyler If a hundred sick people take a pill and only fifty get well, is that pill from God?
- Paul That’s the wrong analogy. Coming to faith in Christ is not a pill you take once and then passively wait for the results. It is a twenty-four hour a day program, for the rest of your life. That’s why it’s called being born again. Let’s say a hundred obese people sign up for a weight loss program. Four months later, if fifty are still obese, you don’t know why it failed. Maybe they never showed up for class, or they didn’t follow the program.
- Jose He’s right. If all Christians misbehaved that would be one thing, but if there are some of each, you can’t draw a clear conclusion.
- Tyler You’re going to ignore all the evil done by Christians and let them get away with it?
- Karl If I understand the Bible correctly, they won’t get away with anything. God will see to that.
- Latisha Forget your neighbor and make sure you aren’t a hypocrite yourself.
- Mary said something but couldn’t be heard since her voice had grown very weak. Sandra was sitting next to her and repeated her words.
- Sandra Mary is asking if a Christian would share examples of the work of the Holy Spirit they have seen.
- Wayne, the pastor who shared at a previous gathering, spoke up.
- Wayne I’d be glad to. I’ve been a pastor for thirty years and could talk for hours about what I’ve seen: marriages restored; bitterness renounced; anger, hatred, greed, and lust abandoned; kindness, patience, and rejoicing increased; money returned; prayers answered; financial provision at just the right time; bodies healed; those in danger protected; guidance given; love for neighbors swelled; and God is given the honor he is due for all this.

- Sandra Mary says thank you. She also asks if you would stop over to talk with her after the meeting.
- Wayne I'd be happy to.
- David I think the Old Testament prophets said the Messiah would purify his people.
- Wayne He's doing it in churches around the world, through the Holy Spirit.
- Liz I'm a little confused. In the Old Testament, God's people were the Jews. So now are his people called Gentiles?
- Paul In the Old Testament, God's people were the physical descendants of Abraham, the Jews, although some Gentiles joined them, as the Unity story brought out. When Jesus appeared to announce the kingdom of God, Gentiles were also invited to join. Now God's people include any Jew or Gentile who comes to God through Christ's new covenant. (Looking at David.) Most Christians come from the Gentiles, yet the God of Israel still loves the descendants of Abraham and longs for them to come home.
- Latisha I know a lot of Christians say God is at work in their life, but isn't that also true of the followers of other religions?
- Wayne They talk about the tenants of their faith and their practices, but have you noticed they rarely if ever speak about God working in their life. For centuries, hoards of Christian missionaries have fanned out across the globe because they have personally experienced God's power, confirming Jesus' resurrection. This level of missionary zeal is found almost exclusively in Christianity, or cults that have splintered from it.
- David How do you know these Christian missionaries have experienced God's power?
- Wayne Because they say so. I've heard it in person and read it in their books. And they believe it. If they were making it up, why would they give up the comforts of home for a lifetime in a jungle?
- David Maybe they assumed God did it and interpreted favorable events as the work of God.
- Karl Dimwit excuse.
- David What?
- Karl You accuse these missionaries of being so dense that they can't tell the difference between ordinary coincidence and the hand of God. Poor naïve fools, how many thousands have wasted their lives in the frozen arctic or a small pacific island, all because they're so easily duped.

Liz We've been here before.

David You're right. I'm resorting to the same old lame arguments. These Christians say God is working in them, but I don't want to believe it, so I accuse them of simple-mindedness without having heard a single word from their mouth.

Anna Are you saying that the evidence of God visiting Earth didn't stop two thousand years ago?

Jose Not only did it not stop, it exploded! Instead of forty Jewish authors of the Bible, there are millions of Jewish and Gentile worshipers of God all over the world, ready to tell us about the Savior God they've encountered.

David That's right, Jose. I never thought of it that way. Wow! Those who met God didn't all live thousands of years ago. It's like being able to interview Moses or Matthew today. All I have to do is go talk to them or read their books. And so will anyone who is serious about searching for eternal life.

Tyler Aaargh!

Paul Only make sure you talk to the right ones. There are lots of false believers, false prophets, and wolves in sheep's clothing.

Anna How do you tell who's who?

Paul The same way the Jews in Jesus' time could tell he was sent by God. Compare their words and deeds with what God has already said and done. The children will be just like the Father.

David It's getting late. Shall we vote? (David labeled a stone "Fruit".) Here is the statement we are voting on: Many Christians today claim that God is at work in their lives, as the Bible promises. We are not voting on whether you are familiar with their claims or believe them, since many of us haven't had a chance to interview them yet. This is only a vote on whether they are claiming it.

When the votes were collected, one voted no and the rest yes. After the vote, Mary asked Sandra to say something on her behalf.

Sandra Mary would like to ask a couple more questions.

David Absolutely. Take all the time you need.

Sandra She wants to ask Paul a question. Is Christianity the only religion where the main prophet rose from the dead?

Paul Yes, and there were plenty of witnesses who saw him afterward, men and women who knew him well. Jesus is the only one who proved by actions and not mere words that he can make good on his promise to give eternal life to whoever comes to him.

Then Sandra gasped with excitement and said, “Are you sure?”

Sandra Mary asks . . . (Sandra choked up and wiped her eyes.) She asks if someone would move some plywood pieces over here and lay them between her and the pillars.

A few in the crowd began to clap. David wasn’t sure what was going on, but three men from the crowd were already running to pick up plywood and place it near Mary. She drove her wheelchair over the plywood to the post next to the pillars. With a trembling hand, she lifted the necklace from around her neck and hung it on the post. Some cheered, while Sandra and Liz embraced her. Then she whispered something to Sandra.

Sandra Mary says she believes in Jesus and is giving her remaining days to him. She wants to thank all of you, and especially David, for helping her find eternal life. She may not be able to come here anymore. She hopes with all her heart to see every one of you in the kingdom of God someday. She will have a new body then, and when she sees you entering the gates of the holy city, she will run with all her might to greet you.

After most had left, for the third night in a row, David asked to talk with Paul in private. Paul asked David, “What are you thinking?”

“I guess I should be happy for Mary, but I don’t know what to think.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to be truly happy unless you believed as she does.”

“To be honest, I’m more relieved than anything. I felt the pressure of getting her to the truth.”

“Do you think she found it?” Paul asked.

“I’m almost certain the Bible is true, and I know what it promises and what it is asking of me, but something is blocking me. I can’t bring myself to take the next step.”

“David, these meetings of yours have done a fantastic job of clearing away obstacles. But there’s still something that can veto everything.”

“What is that?”

“Your will. A person can be shown the reality of God but still choose to turn from him. Judas is proof of that. This is why two people seeing the same evidence choose differently. They think the reason is the evidence, but the real reason is their choice.”

“Why would one person choose to love God and another choose not to?”

Paul remarked, “That my friend is the question of the ages. I don’t have the answer. What I do know is that this choice has eternal weight.”

“Why am I hesitating? Is there nothing you can do to help me?”

“You have all the information you need, more than most will ever get. Your will is your will. No one can exercise it for you. Either you pull the trigger or you don’t.”

# CHAPTER 17

Wednesday, June 2

This evening had the highest attendance to date, close to one hundred. News around town kept drawing more spectators. The newcomers had no idea what the core group had endured for three months to get to this point. The weather was ideal and the crowd expectant.

Sandra made an announcement. “I stopped to visit Mary today. She has gotten too weak to come any more. Pastor Wayne will be going to her house each day to visit her. She asked me to tell you that she is praying for each of you to find the truth about Jesus.”

David said, “Thank you, Sandra. We will miss Mary. She came the first day and didn’t miss a single meeting.” David walked up to the pillars. “Before the story, I’m going to read the stones in our last pillar, Christian Proofs.

Textual Accuracy	Claims
Selecting the Books	Proof
Discrepancies	Unity
History	Fruit



## Good News

A long time ago, in a distant land, there ruled a King. He loved the members of his kingdom and governed with wisdom, justice and benevolence. He built cities throughout his realm, which he adorned with beautiful houses, boulevards, and parks. The glory of each city was the tree of life in the

central square. All who ate regularly of this tree lived forever. Once a month, the King traveled on a circuit to visit the contented people of each city. His loyal citizens lived in peace and safety.

One year, when the King was absent for an extended period, a city named Terra was visited by an outsider, the deceiver. He spread half-truths about the King and convinced Terra to experiment with banned practices. This introduced independence and selfishness, and before long the inhabitants were mistreating each other. The dam had been breached and conditions grew steadily worse. They lied, stole, lusted, slandered, and hated, eventually degenerating into violence and immorality. The entire city was infected.

When the King returned, he was appalled. Because Terra was in open rebellion, he removed the tree of life from the square. Then he withdrew until the time when he would deliver the city.

The city went on for years in this dreadful state. Because the tree of life was gone, people began to die. After some years, everyone viewed dying as normal. Those born after the rebellion had never known anything else and did not know immortality was possible. They saw themselves as noble when facing death with dignity, not realizing it was the King's punishment.

Eventually, wrongdoing seemed normal. They sensed they shouldn't act so badly, but they ignored their conscience which further hardened their hearts. They were consoled by the worst of the villains, who made the rest seem good in comparison.

A few invented stories about the King, but since he didn't visit their city anymore, their stories bore little resemblance to reality. Some expected the King to allow them to live in another city after they died, in spite of all the wrongs they had done. They assumed he was like them and didn't mind evil all that much. Most gave the King little thought and were concerned only with enduring a brief life of impurity, selfishness, and pain. Several thousand years passed.

One morning, two men named Abe and Peter set out for the marketplace. They were part of a minority in the city who had reconciled with the King and now worked for him. They met a man named Omar and told him, "We have good news from the King. He has promised on oath to remake this city into a paradise, and he appointed his Son, the Prince, as the one who will bring it to pass. It will be the home of righteousness. Therefore he sent the Prince to turn each one of us from our wicked ways, to prepare us for this new life. Trust in him, for he alone brings peace with the King. Forsake evil and practice love and holiness as the King commands."

Omar laughed. “How strange you sound. Righteousness? Wicked ways? I’ve never seen this King.”

Abe responded, “The King’s message sounds strange only because this city has drifted so far from him. He doesn’t want anyone to perish and offers terms of amnesty. Accept his mercy before time runs out.”

“Time runs out?” scoffed Omar. “This city has been here thousands of years, so I expect it to continue for thousands more. Good day.”

Next, Abe and Peter spoke with a woman named Aruna. “We have exciting news. The King sent his Son with official authority to forgive our sins. He also has power to raise the dead and give eternal life to all who repent and become his servants.”

Aruna replied, “Are you talking about that ancient story of the holy man who was killed?”

Peter went on, “Yes. This wicked city put its own Prince to death. However, the King raised that innocent man from the dead and seated him in his throne room. He will someday return here to judge the good and the bad according to their deeds. Therefore we warn everyone to submit to him who was sent to liberate us from our sins. Be baptized in his name and receive the promised Holy Spirit who will transform you into the likeness of the King’s Son. Then you can rejoice on the day he returns, instead of fleeing in shame.”

Aruna became enraged. “I have nothing to be ashamed of, and I deeply resent you implying that I need to repent.” She left in a huff.

Feeling discouraged, Abe and Peter decided to speak with one more person, a woman named Lien. “Believe in the Prince and what he said.”

Lien asked, “Who is he, and what did he say?”

Abe said, “He is the King’s son, sent to rescue us from this city’s darkness. He suffered and was rejected by men.”

“I can relate to that,” confessed Lien.

“Though he was put to death on the cross, the King raised him from the dead, and today he is the savior and ruler of all mankind. He is ready to forgive the worst of sinners, provided they listen to him and become his disciple.”

“How can I be sure of his forgiveness?”

“Your acquittal was purchased with the Prince’s own blood, shed to wash away your sins. Sit down and we will tell you the Prince’s works, which certify him as the King’s true ambassador. We will also relate how the Holy

Spirit transformed our lives, offering further proof that the Prince is alive today.” Lien sat on the grass with Abe and Peter in the public park and listened until lunchtime as they explained the good news of the kingdom.

Lien asked, “When will the Prince come back?”

“No one knows, but it may be soon.”

Lien’s eyes widened. “What does the Prince ask of me?”

“Love him with all your might, do his will, maintain a clear conscience, consult him for all major decisions.”

“Go on.”

Peter continued, “Love your enemies, pray without ceasing in his name, and shun evil. Hope in his promises and the age to come. Rein in your tongue, entertain no doubts, submit to authority, do might works in his name, steward your money, and call upon him in the day of trouble.”

“Will it be difficult?”

“You will have to endure hardship, and if you drift away you will lose your reward. But if you are faithful to the end, the reward is very great. The Prince’s Spirit will come and live within you to guide and assist you. Ask the King anything in his Son’s name, and he will do it for you. When you join the Prince, you join his extended family whose hallmark is love. We are ever ready to comfort, encourage and assist our new brothers and sisters in the faith. Come to our regular gatherings at this location.” Peter handed her a piece of paper with an address.

Lien assured them, “I will be there. Please accept my deepest gratitude for telling me this. I never knew immortality was possible.”

Abe added, “The promise of the King is much more than mere immortality. The kingdom we will inherit has all the good things of this life, but none of the bad. Our bodies will be transformed into imperishable bodies. Beyond this, the King has marvelous treasures which the eye of man has never seen.”

Buoyed by their experience with Lien, the two chose to talk to someone else. They saw a man named Fuji and presented the eternal gospel to him. “The King has appointed his Son to be lord over all. He is the only one with the authority and power to save us from the judgment hanging over this city. Since the King has given us a window of mercy, we should heed his warning, renounce all evil, and be loyal to him.”

Fuji said, “I have read about the Prince and I respect him. As for this city, it is pleasing to the King.”

Peter disagreed. “Many of the people we talk to despise the King and his righteous ways.”

“That is because your message is too unyielding. I attend that temple over there, where they believe in the innate goodness of all men.”

“We are aware of that temple, a haven of false prophets who invent lies about the King and replace his commands with their own.”

Fuji smiled. “We preach a message of love.”

“You blind men’s eyes to the Prince’s warnings. Forsake your sin and accept the Prince’s forgiveness, before the door is shut forever.”

Fuji began to leave. “I have a comfortable home up on that hill. I just added a new deck with an impressive view of the valley, where I expect to eat, drink and be merry for years to come.”

One day, Abe and Peter were reasoning with people in the marketplace when the City Magistrate and his aide approached. “Word has gotten around that you worshipers of the Prince have been troubling our fine citizens. Put these two in the dungeon until their trial.”

A few days later, Abe and Peter were brought into the town square for public examination. The whole town gathered to watch. The Magistrate and his aide took their seats and proclaimed, “Call the first witness.”

A man came forward and testified, “These men spread hatred. They accuse our noble city of corruption and threaten the wrath of the King.”

The Magistrate asked, “Is this true?”

Abe stood and said, “Long ago Terra was a good city, and the King was pleased with her, but her people were led astray by the deceiver. It’s wickedness was proven when you killed the King’s Son, the Prince, who had done you no wrong. Our King overruled you by raising him from the dead, and through him offers forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. The Prince’s return is near, at which time he will utterly destroy this city and build an exceedingly greater one. The birth pangs of that great day have already begun, as increasingly frequent disasters buffet this city: earthquakes, fires, wars, floods, and famine.”

“Don’t you say the King loves us? Why would he do such things?”

Peter answered, “It is because he loves us that he warns us ahead of time, so we may escape the judgment we deserve. This is why he sent his Son. When we were condemned criminals, he died to rescue us. Forsake your love of this city, which is passing away.”

The Magistrate disagreed. “This city is filled with good people building a better society. There is no limit to what we can accomplish working together. Many of our citizens are deeply spiritual, and our city is filled with places of worship.”

Peter replied, "Your society is under the influence of the evil one. If you would study the King's holy book, you would see this plainly. Instead, you distort its words to suit your fancy because there is no fear of the King in this place."

The Mayor's aide said, "You disciples of the Prince think you are holy. The other day I saw one of your people at the public games."

Abe declared, "As for that man, the Prince will decide his fate when he arrives. But you condemn yourself by agreeing that the public games are shameful."

"What about that woman Lien who joined your group? Everyone in Terra knows her sordid past."

"The Prince has forgiven her past and washed her. Now she is white as snow. She has changed and no longer does what is disgraceful, bringing great joy to the King and his entire court. All his disciples were once corrupt Terrans, but now they are pardoned and purified citizens of the city that is to come."

The Magistrate commanded, "Enough of this. Put them in the stocks and post a guard."

The disciples had gathered to one side to watch this spectacle and among them was one named Maui. He had frequented the believer's gatherings, but would not surrender fully to the Prince. He lived a double life, keeping one foot in the King's camp and one in the camp of his enemy. As the crowd dispersed, Maui's drinking companions approached him and asked, "Was that you we saw standing with those believers? You're not one of them, are you?"

Maui laughed. "Certainly not. I was only walking past them."

His friends said, "We'll see you at the party tonight. The wine barrel is bursting."

"You can count on me as usual."

When night came, the man assigned to guard Abe and Peter drew near and whispered, "My name is Tebogo, and I cannot allow this injustice." He released them from the stocks and encouraged them to go into hiding.

Abe told him, "Thank you for your kindness, but you will get in trouble with the authorities."

Tebogo said, "I would rather be in trouble with those who can only kill the body, than be in trouble with the Prince who can throw both body and soul into hell."

Peter urged him, "Please come to our evening gatherings."

“If I can, but I may be in jail before long.”

“The Prince will not forget the mercy you have shown his children.” Then Abe and Peter disappeared into the darkness.

Some days later, the disciples were gathered together in the evening. They sensed that the time of the Prince’s coming was getting close. Abe stood up in their midst and instructed, “We have shared his message with everyone in the city. The day of our deliverance draws near, but it is a joy mixed with trembling as we sense the heavy hand of judgment moving over the city. In light of the Prince’s imminent appearing, I urge you all to abstain from anything that pollutes body and spirit, so as not to jeopardize your inheritance. Be ready, so that when he comes he will find you at your post and not indulging your pleasures. Remember the sacrifice the Prince made on the cross, how he purchased us with his own blood.”

After the meeting, Abe and Peter approached Maui. “We have heard reports that you have been unfaithful to the Prince.”

Maui said nervously, “What do you mean?”

“You cannot love both the King and your life here. Don’t you recall the woes pronounced on hypocrites by the Prince?”

“I assure you, I have been clean.”

Peter rebuked him. “You are lying to the Holy Spirit and think the King does not see what you do in darkness. Repent of your adulterous ways before the Prince comes, or you will be swept away in the destruction of the city.”

Maui protested. “I don’t know what you are talking about.” He said this because he was only concerned with how he appeared to people, but had no regard for how he appeared to the King.”

Next, Abe and Peter brought with them a sister in the faith and the three of them confronted Juanita, a member of their group for many years. “Juanita, with the Prince being at the door, we need to speak with you about your faith. It has been reported, and confirmed by your own words, that you still tolerate sin in your life, fits of anger, foul language, and grumbling.”

Juanita said casually, “I’m not proud of those, but I’m not worried because the Prince forgives me.”

Abe instructed her, “You have twisted his message, which calls us to believe in the one who hates sin and who shed his blood to turn us from wrongdoing. You are no different than the unrepentant Terrans, except for your empty profession of faith.”

Juanita said, “Don’t you believe in the King’s love?”

“The King’s kindness is meant to lead us to repentance, but you have perverted the King’s good news into a license to sin. We implore you to put off your filthy garments before the Prince comes and casts you into darkness.”

Juanita took offense and stepped into the dark street, unmoved by their words. As she proceeded down the street, she passed Maui, who was hurrying across town to his friend’s drinking party.

Abe said to Peter, “Come with me. There is one more we need to talk to, but he is not here.” They traveled to the home of a man named Julius and inquired, “You were once part of our family, going out with us to plead with the citizens of Terra. In our meetings you spoke words of encouragement about the never ending joy we would share someday in the new city. Why have you stopped coming?”

Julius said calmly, “Everything’s fine.”

Peter said, “All is not fine. You have strayed from the Prince’s family.”

“I serve my own version of the King.”

“There is only one version of the King. Your earlier service to him will be of no benefit, if you don’t maintain your faithfulness to the end. What turned you away?”

“If you must know, I have objections over how the meetings are run, and a brother uttered cruel words to me.”

Abe pleaded, “My friend, you are shackled by the sins of dissension and unforgiveness. Confess these transgressions and reconnect yourself to the Prince’s servants. Otherwise you will continue drifting away from the Savior.”

Julius said, “I disagree. Now if you will excuse me, I have several projects I’m working on.”

As they left the house, Peter wept. “I think my heart will break. How can I endure seeing one who shared our struggles walk away from the hope of the gospel?”

Abe added, “I feel the same about all who linger on the fringe of the kingdom, like Maui and Juanita. We have to stay strong for the sake of those who do value their soul.”

One day in the future, Peter awoke early in the morning and sat on the edge of his bed. Suddenly, he felt an inexpressible joy and peace. He knew he should go at once to the city gate. As he crossed the city, he saw Terrans

starting their day as usual. They were planning marriages, business ventures, vacations and retirements. Peter considered talking with them about the Prince's coming, but knew he was not to delay.

Nearing the gate, he saw disciples streaming in from all directions. They gathered just inside the still closed gate, which suddenly flew open under its own power. The believers poured through the gate as one man and scanned the horizon in every direction. Far to the east was a range of lofty, snow capped mountains, and some set their gaze in that direction.

In a few minutes, the glorious moment came. Someone pointed eastward at the horizon and shouted, "Look!!" Over the crest of a mountain pass came a rider on a white horse, followed by a large army. The believers broke into a dash toward the Prince. Even the aged found themselves running as if their youthful vigor had been fully restored.

The Prince streaked down the mountain side until he met his bride on the plain below. Their joy cannot be expressed with words. They led him and his army in triumphal procession toward the city. Abe, Peter, and Lien were among the festive throng. As they neared the city, the Prince told them to wait on the outskirts with a portion of his army while he carried out the just judgment of his Father. The Prince and the rest of his army continued toward Terra, which was still unaware of his approach.

Earlier, a few in the city had seen the disciples depart and had followed behind them through the gate. One was a fellow who had attended the believer's study groups since his youth. He knew the King's laws very well and loved singing songs of worship. However, he had failed to put the King's commands into practice. The Prince seized him, and put him in a temporary jail his army was setting up just outside the city gate. Coming out of the city next was unrepentant Juanita, expecting the Prince to shower her with affection. She received a rude awakening as she was also hurled into the jail. Following her through the gate was Maui, the hypocrite. He was a little anxious, but was gambling on a good outcome. The Prince's soldiers bound him with chains and threw him in the prison.

By this time, all of Terra was aware that an invading army was at their gate, and the city plunged into panic. The gate was slammed shut and Terran soldiers mounted the walls. No sooner had the gate been bolted than the Prince burst through it. He swept the soldiers from the top of the walls with the breath of his mouth.

Once inside the walls, the Prince went straight for the city dungeon to rescue Tebogo, who had delivered Abe and Peter from the stocks. Ever since that time, he had been longing for the Prince's appearing. Filled with tears of joy, Tebogo was placed outside the city in the camp of the believers.

While the city descended into chaos, Julius the deserter was enjoying himself in a warm bath, listening to music, and lost in a fascinating novel. Coming unannounced, like a thief in the night, the Prince burst into his home. He yanked Julius naked from his bath and threw him in that same condition into the jail.

The Prince's army moved through the city, while the terror-stricken citizens searched for holes in the ground to hide. The Prince's soldiers grabbed Omar, the mocker, and Aruna, the offended. Fuji was dragged from his beautiful house on the hill, the one having the new deck with an impressive view. The Magistrate and his aide were hunted down and captured, their reign coming to an abrupt end.

Some shook angry fists at the Prince, their hardness of heart blinding them to their own guilt. Before long, everyone was removed from the city and put in the jail. The citizens of Terra moaned as they watched their homes being burnt to the ground. However, the believers did not weep, for they were looking forward to the city, whose architect and builder is God.

The city of Terra was gone. All that remained was a heap of ashes. The Prince picked up the jail with its inhabitants and carried it to a valley far, far away. There he flung the jail and everyone in it down into a steaming crevasse on the valley floor. An immense stone was slid over the crevasse to seal it for all time.

The King's avenger returned to his people and announced with a loud voice, "The wicked are gone forever, and their vile city is no more. Prepare to receive your inheritance." The Prince lifted his head and set his gaze to the east. All his beloved turned in that direction and saw the most glorious sight. The King himself was coming over the mountains, arrayed in exceedingly great splendor and majesty. Thousands upon thousands attended him. Pomp and grandeur went before him. His throne blazed with magnificent brilliance.

As the King drew near, he proclaimed, "Now I shall dwell again with my people." At the King's word, a new city descended from heaven right upon the spot where Terra had been just a short time before, having been cleansed by judgment and fire. After the city came to rest, the ground under it raised itself up, so that the city overlooked the transformed plain surrounding it.

Now the believers began to understand more fully how their new home would be far superior to the original Terra.

The Prince led them inside to the reinstated tree of life. As they partook, their natural bodies were transformed into immortal bodies. The King made this announcement: “To you who have feared my name and loved my Son, let it be known that this is a royal city, my permanent residence. Never again will the deceiver nor the wicked enter its gates. Neither will any harm, sorrow, or death come into this city. Rather, the treasures of the nations will be brought into it, and the light of my presence will illuminate it. Come and feast at my banquet table without cost.”



David stood slowly and said, “We will discuss the story Friday.”

## Friday

David Here we go. What are your reactions to Wednesday’s story?

Everyone was hesitant to speak.

David Don’t be shy. I know there are strong feelings. I’ve got ‘em.

Liz I loved it when the King came over the eastern hills at the end. What a moment for those people.

Tyler Good for them. Not so good for those thrown into the steaming crevasse.

Liz That was their choice. The King did all he could to prevent it.

Elliot Baloney! Why didn’t the King go into the city himself and prove who he was?

Geoff He did. He sent his Son. They murdered him.

Tyler That was centuries ago. Why didn’t he come and warn those people at the end?

Geoff He did. He sent his servants. They threw them in the dungeon.

Paul Elliot and Tyler, you presume that if God stood upon this earth, fully revealing his goodness and power, everyone would reform. That’s already been tried. Some did, Judas didn’t.

Liz It's a fantastic offer. A new body. Paradise without pain and death. This is what we've been searching for. Why would anyone in their right mind refuse it?

Karl The offer is clear enough, but what's our part? That wasn't so clear. They used a lot of different ways to describe it.

Liz Give God everything you have.

Geoff Are you sure? Won't God forgive me if I don't give him everything?

Jose Why don't you want to give him everything?

Geoff It's not that I don't want to, but . . . He doesn't ask for that much.

Jose That's what some of those characters in the story thought, and they got the shock of their lives when the Prince showed up.

Owen Most scholars believe we aren't able to give God everything we have. That's why Jesus died for us.

David Somehow I missed that when I read the Bible. I bet those scholars are popular.

Karl Did the story accurately represent the gospel?

Sandra It wasn't perfect since it's not the Bible, but I think it was pretty close.

Robin, who had heard the Terra story on Wednesday, spoke up.

Robin I don't think it was the gospel. Too legalistic.

Karl What does that mean?

Sandra Christian-speak.

Paul Robin, the gospel you heard may have been warped by flawed men. If this world is filled with rebels, as the Bible teaches, isn't it possible some of them slipped into the pulpit?

Robin No. These men are kind, wise and godly.

Paul Sheep's clothing. I agree with Sandra, the story was close.

Latisha I don't like all that fire and brimstone stuff. Can't we focus on the affirming parts?

Hank You want to borrow my highlighter to use on your Bible?

Latisha What?

Elliot Latisha, if I tell you I don't believe, what would you say to me?

Latisha You are missing out on something wonderful.

Elliot Thanks. I'll pass. You folks go ahead and have a good time.

Latisha I'd tell you it's some good stuff. Try it.

- Anna That is bizarre, Latisha. God is going to suddenly appear, burn down our homes, throw us in a dungeon forever, and you wouldn't say one single word to warn us?
- Latisha I don't necessarily agree with that view.
- Karl Does the Bible?
- David For those of us who've read it, I think we know the answer.
- Geoff Not so fast. It depends on how you interpret it.
- Latisha I felt so bad for those poor people going through the gate at the end. They thought they'd be entering paradise but were jailed instead. Isn't God merciful?
- Sandra You can't change God's terms because of sentimental feelings. You may want to lower his standards to let more people into heaven, but don't make the disastrous mistake of assuming God will follow your lead.
- Jose Like Tua did.
- Owen You're talking about the Old Testament, but in the New Testament God softened his stance. He knows we will keep on sinning, but Jesus keeps forgiving us.
- Geoff That's right. The fear of God is only in the Old Testament.
- Paul You two have been conned.
- Latisha With all this gloom and judgment, where is the good news?
- Liz The good news is that you can escape the gloom and judgment. This world is like a filthy house inhabited by a pack of murderous drug dealers. The house has been condemned, since the rotteness has seeped into the walls. Here comes the good news. The governor stands outside with a bull horn shouting, "Come out of that den of thieves. Renounce your life of crime and I will give you a full pardon with no prison time. I will even build you a new mansion for free." What an offer! Why turn it down?
- Anna This world isn't so bad that it's been condemned, and we are not murderous drug dealers.
- Karl That's what the guys in the Morality story thought.
- David Liz is right. It's exactly how the Bible portrays our world. One day Jesus will sweep in unannounced and bring a violent end to people's plans. This is the horrible destiny of my neighbors who are living quiet lives, not bothering anyone. The Bible teaches consistently that the wicked will come to a bitter end, and its pages are littered with dead bodies so no one misses the point. And there

will be a lot in the wicked category since most people don't give God everything. My Sunday door-to-door visits confirmed this.

Anna Do you believe that?

David Do I think someday millions of people will be abruptly thrown into a dark crevasse after seeing everything they hold dear burned to the ground? Do I think some will live on in a splendid new world, while our friends and relatives suffer weeping and gnashing of teeth? It's too black and white, too all or nothing.

Jose You're being illogical, David. It's not false just because you don't like it.

David How could most of the world be so drastically wrong?

Karl But you already know most of the world is wrong. That's one of the things we learned in our search, and the door-to-door. Do you now want to say everybody is okay only because you find the Christian message too harsh?

Anna I do see the appeal of thinking everybody is okay . It makes the future look much more pleasant. But, maybe that's a delusion.

Tyler Now do you see why I've been fighting the Bible all along? Its message is extremely offensive, since it promises such an awful end for mankind.

Liz That doesn't make it untrue. How will venting your anger at God's warnings cancel them? Why not listen to it and escape judgment?

David Such a cataclysmic end of the world is totally without precedent.

Paul Not true. What about the worldwide flood?

David That's a myth.

Jose (Pointing to the right) Have you forgotten the pillars? You're reverting to the pitiful arguments of the scoffer because the message isn't to your liking. You are using excuses that you yourself have already discredited. What happened to your fear of God?

David I think he probably doesn't exist.

Karl Are you now comfortable with *probably*? You thought God existed a few days ago. But now you've changed your mind because you don't like reality.

David Whatever. But why is God doing it this way? It isn't working. The world is full of false religions and people who could care less about God.

Sandra Is that God's doing? It is men who spread lies and men who ignore God.

David What about my brother Samuel, and my mother? They weren't Christians. Am I to believe they are in hell?

Karl Now you're sounding like Barb. David, I don't know where your mother and brother are, but I do know this. You rejecting God won't help either one of them, and it won't do you any good either.

David The world can't deserve that kind of judgment.

Paul David, isn't it possible that the world has sunk so deep into depravity that its citizens no longer recognize the blackness of their condition? Isn't it possible that the majority fell into this delusion, and now it perpetuates itself because we think there's no way we're that bad? When Jesus told the Jews how far they had strayed, it sounded so offensive that they murdered him.

David It can't be true!

Paul Now do you see why so many are eager to discredit the Bible? In the days of your ancestors, God threatened cataclysmic judgment on Israel, but most Jews reacted in denial, like you. As the book of Lamentations recounts, God did destroy the nation. He burnt Jerusalem to ashes, killing many and dragging the rest in chains to the steaming crevasse of Babylon. That is a historical fact. Why repeat their mistake?

Liz David, do you think God will be unfair at the final judgment?

David What the Bible predicts for that day could never be fair!

Paul Can a man judge God? Listen to me, David Ruben. You will never find the eternal life you've been searching for all these months until you humble yourself and declare that the Lord is righteous.

David grabbed the book. Then he stormed out of the tent and into his house, slamming the back door behind him.

Karl I believe we are done for the evening.

Everyone departed for home.

Standing in a dark room, David peered out the window and watched the last people file out of his backyard. Once everyone was gone, he went into the woods behind his house to cool down, walking by the light of the full moon that had risen in the east. Fifteen minutes later, he returned to his house. His mind was a little more rational, but he was still steaming.

*I endured months of meetings. I rented a circus sized tent. I knocked on the doors of strangers. I read the whole Bible and countless other books. My career's been threatened. Is this how it ends, left with a choice I find utterly offensive? What about Mom? What about Samuel? This can't be the gate to*

*eternal life. But this is the only one. I know it is. Nothing else came remotely close. Is this the battle of the will Paul talked about? How can I possibly come to God on these terms.*

David's anger turned into depression. What was the point of continuing? He wanted to cancel the meetings. If others want to keep going, they'd have to do it in someone else's backyard. He fingered his necklace and almost yanked it off. David slumped into a chair and began to weep. The world seemed very dark at this moment. He couldn't go back to his old way of thinking, smiling at life as if death didn't exist. David remembered the story he heard in his childhood about the children of Israel, doomed to wander in the desert the rest of their lives. They couldn't go back to Egypt, and they were unwilling to enter the Promised Land on God's terms.

*Why am I unwilling? What did Liz say? Am I sure God will be unfair at the final judgment? It sure seems like it. But . . . I could be wrong. David slouched in his chair, emotionally drained. Then a thought came to him. I could try praying. It wouldn't do me any harm. The problem is, I've never prayed in my life. Sure I recited a few ritual prayers when I was young, but it wasn't like this, where I really meant it. I'm not sure what to say, and what do I do with my hands? Should I kneel?*

It was almost comical, a grown man struggling with something that children have done. Finally, David knelt down, folded his hands, and began to open his mouth. Nothing came out. He tried again and came up with these words: "God . . . I . . . need help." It was all he had. David pondered what was surely the most pathetic prayer ever uttered by a son of Abraham.

He was headed for bed when he noticed the small, smooth stone on his fireplace mantel. He stepped into his backyard wearing a bathrobe and carrying a flashlight. He was about to pick up one of the unused marble stones, but there were only two left, so he decided to find an uncut stone. He searched the woods behind his house and found a suitable one, about ten pounds. Bringing it inside, he washed it off and set it on the mantle over his fireplace, next to the small stone he had put there at the beginning of his search. This new stone dwarfed its companion, symbolic of how his search had grown. Then he went to bed.

The next day, Saturday, David decided he needed a break. Today there would be no thinking about the meetings or last night's discussion, and no reading the Bible. It was a bright, sunny day and he had several errands he

needed to do. He had fallen behind due to his obsession with the search. It would be a welcome diversion.

First he stopped at a coffee shop to get a hot drink and read the morning paper. As he was relaxing, he couldn't help overhearing the conversation between two men at the table next to him.

One said, "My friend went to check out this group that meets at a guy's house. Something like search for life."

The other growled, "I heard they're a bunch of self-righteous Bible thumpers."

"All I know is, it sounds boring."

"Those kind of people make me so mad, thinking they're better than everyone and forcing their old-fashioned nonsense down our throats."

"I can't believe my friend went there. I'd be afraid they would sing camp fire songs."

"Did your friend say why he went?"

"He wants to make sure he's going to heaven."

"I'm not worried. I figure if there's a God, he's not too concerned with every detail of my life. He's got bigger things to worry about. As long as I don't do anything real bad, I think I'll be okay."

"If there is something after we die, we'll find out when we get there."

"Sounds like a plan."

David was grateful he had the newspaper to shield the look on his face.

After a few errands, it was time for lunch. David stopped at a cafe. Seated at the table near him were three women his age. One said, "Joan, whatever happened to the guy who took you out to dinner a couple times last month?"

"He wasn't the one."

"You're in your mid-thirties and still single. If you don't watch it, you'll wake up someday an old maid and lonely. You're too picky."

"This is for the rest of my life. I have to know that everything about him is just the way I like it."

"Joan, that person doesn't exist. At some point you have to take a leap and trust someone."

"I haven't met anyone whose views I totally agree with."

"You don't want to marry someone else; you want to marry yourself. Life is a mystery, and that's what makes it beautiful."

David thought, *is she talking to me?*

Joan gazed at the ceiling. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if a prince came swooping down from his castle searching for me? Not an ordinary prince,

mind you, but one who was perfect—faithful, honest, generous, wise, joyful, patient, and loving. He'd sweep me up to his majestic palace, where he'd share his kingdom and never betray me. Neither of us would ever grow old."

Her friend sighed. "Dear, that prince doesn't exist either."

David jumped up from his chair and headed toward the women's table. At the last minute he caught himself and kept going as if he were headed to the restroom. *What am I doing? I don't believe in that stuff. Do I?*

Later that afternoon, David walked through the city park. He passed behind a man sitting on a bench who was reading the newspaper. He glanced over and noticed a headline which said, "Search for Eternal Life Continues." He froze.

"Hello." David said. "I couldn't help noticing what you're reading."

The man said, "It's a follow-up to an article a couple months back about this guy who started meetings at his house. He gets loads of people to talk about heaven. I never saw the first article, did you?"

"Uh, yes, I did."

The man set the newspaper down on the park bench. "It sounds interesting. My wife's been bugging me to take spiritual issues more seriously. She says a good provider not only pays the bills, but makes sure his family is set for eternity. Can't say I find a hole in her logic. See, there she is over there playing with our two daughters and son. I'm not comfortable going to church. But as I read this article, I thought this might work for me. I want to do the right thing for my sweetheart and our precious little ones. I was thinking of checking it out this week. Do you know anything about it?"

"I know they meet Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 7 PM."

"Great. Do you know if they're going to keep meeting?"

"Ah, I . . . think they might."

"Good to hear. Do you go? Maybe I'll see you there."

"Yeah, maybe."

David staggered back to his car. All he could think about was going straight home before he ran into anyone else. He pulled into his driveway and slipped into the house. Throwing his keys on the table, he passed through the living room and suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. Turning his head slowly to the right, he fixed his eyes on the ten pound stone resting on the fireplace mantle. The prayer! He had forgotten all about his feeble, four-word prayer, after which he had met his own ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future.

*It has to be a coincidence, he reasoned, but how could it be? Did one of those Christians spy on me and arrange it all? That would be impossible to pull off. Could it be aliens? Come on, David, get a grip on yourself. I can't deny it happened. There is only one explanation. Is this one of those miracles the Christians talk about? This is scary. I wish it would all go away. That doesn't make sense. I've been searching for the truth, and now I don't like it when I find it. I'm going to make dinner.*

Two hours later, David walked over and stared at the stone. He could dream up all kinds of explanations, but there was only one that was reasonable. David turned his eyes upward and began to be aware of something new and overwhelming, the presence of a powerful being in the universe, one who understands English and who can direct his steps and the steps of others to a particular coffee shop, café, and park bench. But one who is also capable of kindness. He overlooked David's accusing him of injustice, and instead led him to hear exactly what he needed to hear.

*Why is God doing this to me now, after all these years? Maybe because I never asked him before. This is too much to handle in one day. It feels like someone bigger than me has grabbed the steering wheel. I have to go to bed. Passing by the window he looked into his backyard and saw, gleaming in the moonlight, the pillars of marble. What have I gotten myself into?*

The next day, Sunday, David woke early and didn't feel too bad, considering his tumultuous mood the night before. After breakfast, an idea gently impressed upon his thoughts. Maybe he would go to church. That would be radical, seeing that he had never set foot in a church in his life. Did he want to break his streak? Some of his Jewish relatives didn't speak too kindly of Christians. This way he could see if they really were two-headed monsters.

*How should I dress?* David put a suit coat over a casual dress shirt to cover a wide range. Then he jumped in his car and drove around, looking at church signs for a service that started soon. He found one before too long and went inside.

Sitting down, he glanced at the people coming in. *Look at that, one head each.* The music was pleasant and the people were friendly. A man from the congregation stood in front, and for five minutes he talked about a recent experience where God did something remarkable. David pulled to the edge of his seat, wanting to hear every word he said. Then it was time for the sermon.

The pastor began. "I'll be reading from the gospel of Luke, about the two men who were crucified on either side of Jesus."

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:39-43, New International Version)

The pastor looked at the congregation. "Even while Jesus was suffering on the cross, we are shown mankind's two destinies. One man was saved; one was not. Their agony on the cross portrays this world, a place of suffering, and eventually death. Yet, in a short time, one was in paradise. What a glorious ending. But the other was not. What a horrible fate. Why couldn't they both be saved? What made the difference? The difference was in their response to Jesus. The first raged at God for his suffering, though he had brought it on himself. And he did not agree with how Jesus was saving the world. The second acknowledged that his punishment was deserved and that Jesus was innocent.

"Are you blaming God for the evil in this world? Do you think the punishment he dispenses must be unjust? Perhaps the very idea that one man goes to paradise and the other does not disturbs you so much that you refuse to worship him. But is it God's fault? Don't be like the first thief, who demanded eternal life, but only on his terms. This is not your universe! God will rule it as he sees fit. The second thief knew that we are the problem, not God. He also knew Jesus would have a kingdom someday. Be like him and declare that the Lord is righteous."

David sat straight up in his seat when he heard that.

"But wait a minute," the pastor continued. "What is Jesus doing on a cross? Why is the almighty creator of the universe hanging between two criminals, dying a shameful and painful death? If God had only told us to submit to him, he would be fair. But he did so much more. He came searching for us, even while we were spitting in his face. He humbled himself and shared our suffering though he was the only one on Earth not deserving of it. Jesus willingly obeyed his Father and took the death we deserved, so we could be forgiven and live forever with him.

“What more could he possibly do for us? The Lord is righteous, but he also overflows with loving kindness. If you continue to refuse so great an offer, there is no hope for you. But it doesn’t have to be that way. Eternal life is offered. Take it. Take it on God’s terms. Come home to the God who is fair, and more than that, to the God who loves you.”

David sat in the back row staring at the floor, his hands pressed against his forehead, and his heart racing. *What is going on? Is everyone in on it?* The service ended and the crowd drifted over to the coffee and cookies. David wasn’t in the mood for snacks. Finally, he was the only one in the sanctuary. He looked up and glanced around. It was an old church with beautiful stained glass windows. They had a calming effect.

The Lord is righteous. There it was again. David knew that to agree with this meant much more than accepting the fairness of God’s final judgment. It meant God had the right to tell David what he could and could not do, what hobbies are allowed, what books are forbidden, and what people he must befriend. It also meant God gets to dictate how people are saved. It meant God decides what he’ll explain to us and what is left unexplained. Lastly, when God did all this his way, then David must respectfully support it without any grumbling or hint of insubordination. Was he ready to accept this?

The pastor noticed David still sitting in the pew and came over to ask if he needed anything. David answered, “No. I’d like to sit here a while, if that’s okay?”

“By all means,” said the pastor. “Take all the time you need.”

David said, “Can I ask you a question? How did you decide what to say in your talk today?”

“Funny you should ask that. Earlier in the week I had a completely different sermon prepared, but the Holy Spirit kept prompting me to give this one instead. This message didn’t seem to be what the congregation needed, but the Spirit was persistent, so I obeyed.”

“What day was that?”

“Thursday.”

“Are you making this up?”

The pastor was startled.

David quickly apologized. “I’m sorry. That was very rude. Of course you’re telling the truth. Sorry, I’ve had a rough weekend.”

The pastor, who was in his late fifties, reassured him, “That’s okay. I can tell you are searching. If you ever need someone to talk with, you know where I work.”

“Thanks, I might take you up on that.”

As David was leaving the church, he turned back and said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t get your name.”

“My name is Jesse.”

“Jesse? Isn’t that interesting.”

“Why do you say that?”

“My name is David.”

“Fascinating. You seem to know your Bible. Do you get to church often?”

“Not too often,” David said with a slight smile.

On the way home, David stopped at a bookstore and bought a harmless piece of fiction. He needed to escape reality for the rest of the day.

# CHAPTER 18

## Monday

The huge crowd filled the seats. Everyone was wondering what would happen after the way the meeting ended Friday. At seven o'clock, everyone fixed their eyes on David to start the meeting as usual, but he just sat there without the book in his hands. An awkward minute passed. Then Karl ran into the house and returned with the book. When David saw him with it, he looked surprised. Karl told him, "You were a little careless once and I saw where you hid it, but I never looked inside." Karl opened the book to the next story and began to read to the expectant group.



## The Lost Son

There once lived a King who was immortal, and the kingdom he had built was filled with all things magnificent and beautiful. The King was like a Father to his subjects. Since the Father lived forever, he naturally shared his immortality with his children, whom he loved. In the King's realm there was a depression in the ground, a very large and deep circular hole with steep cliffs on every side. The King instructed his children to never go down into it, telling them sternly, "In the day you go down there, you shall surely die."

To their great harm, the children put more stock in entertainment than in their Father's commands. One day, with great anticipation, they ventured into the depression. From the moment they set foot on the bottom, their bodies began to age. To their dismay, the steep cliffs prevented their return. Because of their disobedience, the King laid a curse upon the depression.

It was enveloped in a perpetual grey fog, in contrast to the bright sunshine in the rest of the King's lands. The unhappy souls who lived down there were doomed to hard labor, and in the end were rewarded with death. Sickness, savage animals, and frequent storms made the depression a most unpleasant home.

Their descendants multiplied and spread over the floor of the abyss. Because their forefathers had begun a pattern of disobedience, this race grew more and more wicked. They attacked each other and adopted perverse practices, not understanding the harm this brought. A few retreated into the jungles and remote islands, losing all remnants of civilization and degenerating into savages. The rest stayed together in cities, but lost the knowledge of their original home and its Creator. Several thousand years passed.

There was a man named Judah who one day began to feel restless, so he left the city of his birth to travel across the land. Coming upon a shady resting spot, he turned aside to sooth his weary feet. Soon, another man came down the road. This man, named Nathan, turned aside and asked Judah to tell him the purpose of his journey.

"I am searching for something or someone, but I do not know what it is," explained Judah.

"Why are you searching?" inquired Nathan.

"Four things drew me out the door. The first was my dreams, the desire for a better life. Haven't you ever had a longing for something more than this dreary existence?"

"I have, but a hearty meal or a visit to the cinema always quenched it for a time."

"The second reason is this: Although we long for a wonderful life, we are instead given a miserable one."

Nathan remarked, "I try to find the bright spots."

"I once believed that attitude to be commendable, but now I wonder if someone cursed this world to give us a message."

"What message?"

"Get out of there! Perhaps our griefs were meant to show us that this place is damned."

"I wouldn't mind a better place to live. What is your third reason?"

Judah pulled out his timepiece and inquired, "Who do you think made this?"

"I don't know, but it shows evidence of a skilled watchmaker."

“Look around you at the trees and the birds. Look at your own hands and feet. Don’t they show evidence of great skill? Just as you are certain there must be a watchmaker, so I am certain that creation was designed and built by someone.”

“It would seem logical, but who is he?” asked Nathan.

“I don’t know, but to find him seems vital. Would you agree?”

“Once again, your reasoning is sound. And the fourth motivation?”

“My conscience. It is beyond dispute that evil deeds are perpetrated in this world, and that I contribute my share. All mankind believes evil should be ceased, or else the evildoer be punished if they won’t put a stop to their wicked behavior.”

“That is only fair. What is your point?”

“My point,” cried Judah, “is that we keep on doing evil, with no sign of abatement. Doesn’t that strike you as a problem?”

“I’d rather not think about it,” Nathan said.

“Now put these four together. One, I desire a better life. Two, this world is fit for the trash heap. Three, design in nature points to someone greater. Four, our crimes predict a destiny of judgment.”

“But what does it all mean?”

“It means this is not a good place to pitch my tent!” Judah exclaimed.

“But where else can we go? Look in every direction. What do you see?”

“Fog.”

“Exactly. This is all there is, so we might as well make the best of it.”

Judah shouted, “No! There might be more. We are not like the animals. There is eternity in our hearts, but I cannot tell you who put it there. Death is a violent affront to everything we value. Our lives are filled daily with reminders that all is not right, as if someone is trying to tell us something. I will not passively lie down and give up so easily.”

Nathan rose to his feet. “Sir, you have stirred something in my heart, an idealism and yearning I have not felt since my youth. If you will have me, I would be pleased to accompany you on your pilgrimage.” Judah extended a welcoming hand to Nathan. The two arose and continued down the road.

As they walked along, Nathan said, “I have been thinking about what you said. If there is a better life, do we have any chance of fashioning it with our own hands?”

“This is a good question,” replied Judah. “Many have tried but only succeeded in making this brief life a little more comfortable. No progress has ever been made in abolishing evil or death.”

“Agreed. Therefore, it would seem we need help from someone more powerful than us.”

“And more righteous,” Judah added.

“Perhaps this one could be the Creator you postulated.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Ask for his help. If we are being prompted by our desires, pain, and guilt, maybe the Creator is the one prompting us.”

“You mean we should pray?” said Judah.

“It cannot do us any harm.” Judah and Nathan stepped off the road into a small meadow. They knelt down and turned their faces upward into the ever present fog.

Judah spoke these words. “Oh Creator, hear our request. If there is a better life, we long to lay hold of it. Please send whatever help you are willing.” Judah and Nathan returned to the road and resumed their travels.

The Father was on his perch overlooking the canyon, as he had been for thousands of years. He had been closely following Judah’s progress from the day he left his city. The instant the Father heard Judah’s prayer, his heart was filled with joy. He quickly called his officials and told them, “Two more of my children have turned their feet toward home. Have my Son send one of his faithful messengers to intercept their path and show them the way out of the canyon.”

Even though the King abhors sin, he had been continually surveying the filthy canyon from the day his children rebelled. For thousands of years he had been assisting those who sought to return to him. He visited the valley floor himself more than once, enduring its stench for the sake of those who longed for their Father.

A few days later, Judah and Nathan came across a man named Luke. Judah told him about their quest. Luke said, “I know who the Creator is.”

Judah and Nathan were amazed. “How can this be?”

“He was here, down in the valley,” Luke said.

Judah asked, “What do you mean by valley?”

Luke explained the King’s sun splashed paradise above, the rebellion of his first children, and the King’s plan to bring their descendants into his new kingdom.

“Where is this new kingdom?” Nathan asked.

“The King appointed his Son to one day invade this pit. At that time he will utterly destroy this vile place and all who love it, while those who love

the King and his Son will be spared. Then the purified canyon floor will be raised up to the level of the Father's lands above, and he will once again live among his children."

Nathan's face fell. "The King will destroy the homes, possessions and traditions that I so cherish? This is all I've ever known, and there is much here that is dear to my heart."

Luke answered, "What you cherish has been soaking in the foul brine of wickedness for thousands of years. Seek your Father's land above, which far surpasses this polluted gulch in every way."

Judah asked, "How do we get to this better land?"

"Devote yourselves to the King's Son with all faithfulness. I will bring you to the place where you can meet him, and he will bring you to his Father. It is not far from here."

"Let us depart at once," insisted Judah.

Nathan said, "You go ahead, Judah. I have decided to turn back." Judah was in shock. He pleaded with Nathan, but to no avail. So Judah followed Luke, but Nathan, having loved this present world, returned home.

High above the fog, standing in eternal sunshine, was the Father, with his Son at his right hand. They had been listening to the words of their servant Luke. One of the King's attendants said, "Your majesty, all your servants know that you loathe every form of sin and evil. They also know the depths of depravity in the land below. Why do you allow such a cancerous blight to exist in the midst of your holy creation? It has been two thousand years since your Son brought them the good news. Why do you continue to wait?"

The Son said to the attendant, "My Father does not wish for anyone down there to perish. It is because of his love that he delays judgment." As they were speaking, the eyes of the Father ranged throughout the entire valley, searching for any who would call upon him. The Son continued, "While my Father waits, the door of salvation remains open. One day in the future, that door will shut."

As Judah and Luke walked along, Luke pointed out some stone pillars by the road, which looked like signposts. "Did you ever notice these before?"

Judah said, "I've seen them from a distance, but I never read them. I was told they are irrelevant for our day."

Luke explained, "They contain records of the King's previous visits to the valley. For centuries, the King's laborers have been placing these all over the canyon."

“Does the King have other servants beside yourself, whom I had the good fortune of meeting?”

Luke looked surprised. “He has more followers today than at any time in history. The valley is filled with his servants who are spreading the good news of his coming kingdom to all creation. Furthermore, my meeting you was not good fortune. I was sent to you. Because you set your heart to seek the truth, the Father has been drawing you to the Son all this time.”

Luke announced, “We have arrived at the place near the canyon wall where you can meet the Son who will then bring you to the Father. Do you see those two pine trees over there, barely visible through the fog?”

“Yes, I see them.”

“Pass between them and you will be at the base of the cliff. Keep going straight ahead. Do not turn aside to the right or to the left.”

Judah hesitated. The Father and the Son were at the top of the cliff, staring directly down on him, watching to see what he would do.

“I’m giving up everything for the King. How can I be sure he truly wants me?”

Luke said, “Come over here to one of the King’s signposts, which have his own words on it. Does this look new?”

“No.” said Judah. “It is extremely weathered. It appears to be ancient.”

“Judah, earlier you described what the King has put in every man to prod him to seek salvation. As if this was not enough, he also sent his servants throughout the valley to fill it with the knowledge of him. Listen to me. You set out in search of a better life, but now you see that all this time the King has been searching for you—a search thousands of years in the making.”

Judah began to tremble as he stared at the ancient signpost. He pondered it for a time, then said to himself, “I know what I need to do.” He leapt toward the pine trees, running with all his might, the voice of Luke rooting him on from behind. At that very moment, a thunderous roar poured over the top of the cliff, the sound of a great multitude of angels cheering at the top of their voices.

Judah passed the trees and began ascending the hill. The fog thinned and he beheld something he had never seen in all his life, sunlight. The hill grew steeper and Judah realized he would never be able to climb it by himself. He cried out, “Lord Jesus, save me.” Immediately the Son appeared, streaking down the side of the cliff. He took Judah’s hand, lifted him out of the canyon,

and brought him to the Father. There was great rejoicing in the Father's presence over this lost son who was now home.



Karl closed the book. There was a hush over the crowd. All eyes were on David, who had been visibly moved during the last part of the story. He sat with his head in his hands, tears rolling down his cheeks. Then David rose from his chair and said, "I know what I need to do." He stepped over to the post, removed his necklace, and hung it there. Some in the crowd started clapping, while others gave glory to God.

David turned around and held up his hand to ask for silence. Between snuffles, David said these words: "The Lord is righteous! In the sight of you all I announce that from this day forward I will worship and serve the God of my fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And I will worship his Son, Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah." David closed his eyes, turned his face downward and extended his hands heavenward. "Please forgive me, God, for my years of rebellion. I'm ready to come home. Lord Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." A solemn quiet came over the crowd. The faces of the covenant members showed the full range of emotions, with Anna's being mixed, but Karl had a gentle smile.

The quiet was broken by the rising sound of sobbing, coming from the back row. The tears came from deep within this man's soul and were ten long years in the making. An elderly man stood up and stumbled into the aisle. He threw back his hood and tossed his sunglasses to the ground. The crowd gasped as they immediately saw the resemblance. When David opened his eyes to look at him, he was completely stunned. His legs gave out beneath him, and he fell to his knees. Sobbing uncontrollably, Ezra staggered up the aisle, dropped to his knees, and embraced his lost son who was now found. They wept on each other's neck for a long time. There were very few dry eyes in that place.

As the dramatic moment passed, people came up to congratulate David and meet his father. David and Ezra had their arms around each other and were inseparable for the rest of the evening. When some started to depart, Ezra jumped on a chair and shouted, "Listen, you wonderful people. Come a half hour early on Wednesday, and don't eat anything that whole day."

“What is that all about?” David asked.

“You’ll see.”

Then a man approached. “Do you remember me? I talked to you last Saturday afternoon in the park?”

His eyes still flush with red, David answered, “Of course. I’m glad you made it.”

The man said, “I only have one question. Are all your meetings like this?” David looked down, shook his head and grinned. Then he saw Sandra hurrying to her car and called, “What’s the rush?”

Sandra kept moving and yelled, “I have to tell Mary.”

Next, Hank walked up, got right in David’s face and said, “I’ll be watching you.”

David reacted, “What does that mean?”

“You know exactly what it means.” Hank turned to Ezra and shook his hand. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Ruben. Your son is one in a million.” As Hank turned to leave for his car he looked back. “I’m not going to eat tomorrow or Wednesday.”

With his arm still around his father, David noticed Anna and called her over. “Dad, this is my . . . friend, Anna.” Anna gave David a look.

Ezra’s eyes got wide. “Your friend? Interesting.”

Anna said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Ruben.”

“Please call me Ezra.”

“You’ve got quite a son.”

“So I’ve been told.”

## Wednesday

Two days later, people arrived early as Ezra had requested. Tyler parked his car and walked around the side of the house. As he turned the corner, he almost bumped into a second tent. Tyler stared in disbelief at the tables under this new tent. They were stuffed with a rich assortment of elegant and exotic cuisine. It was a banquet fit for royalty, and far more than they could ever eat.

When Latisha arrived, she said to David, “Wow! Who footed the bill for this?” David pointed to his dad standing next to him.

“You must be a wealthy man,” Latisha quipped.

“Not anymore,” David joked.

Ezra told her, “I had to celebrate for my son.” The huge crowd relished the extravagant catered meal. Ezra went around encouraging everyone to take leftovers home with them. The feast wasn’t the only thing different about the backyard. There was also a large tank full of water.

At seven o’clock, four people were baptized: David, Liz, and two others who had been attending the meetings for weeks. Each gave a short profession of their new faith before they were lowered into the water. Liz brought her parents to watch her baptism. During her testimony, she thanked both of them for the good home they had given her.

When David came up out of the water, he shouted, “I found it! I found eternal life! Now if I fall off a cliff, I’m ready.”

Guarding the baptismal tank were the seven pillars constructed during their pilgrimage.

PILLAR 1 *Attitudes*

Will to Live

Humility

Sacrifice

Assumptions

Finding Truth

Deception

Trust

Searching

PILLAR 2 *Non-religious Paths*

Futile Remedies

Incomplete Sources of Truth

PILLAR 3 *Religious Attitudes*

Anti-religious Bias

Anti-supernatural Bias

Morality

Fearing God

Comparing religions

PILLAR 4 *Set Aside Religions*

Indigenous Religions

Confucianism

Taoism

Zoroastrianism

Hinduism

Miscellaneous Religions

Buddhism

Islam

Jainism

Sikhism

Baha'i.

PILLAR 5

The Blessing of Abraham

PILLAR 6 *Christian Attitudes*

Objections to Christianity

Reasonable Certainty

Enemies of the faith

PILLAR 7 *Christian Proofs and Gospel*

Textual Accuracy

Selecting the Books

Discrepancies

History

Claims

Proof

Unity

Fruit

Good News

The Lost Son

After the baptisms, the group sat down to talk.

Sandra I have a sad announcement. Mary passed away this morning. I think she willed herself to hang on until she saw what happened with David. She died a contented woman, full of hope.

David I wanted to tell her myself.

Sandra David, you'll still be able to. It may even be next week.

David That's right. I have to get used to a whole new way of thinking.

Sandra Mary also gave me a letter to deliver to Barb. In it, Mary asked her to reconsider, so she can see her in the kingdom of heaven someday.

Latisha What do we do now?

David There are only a few pages until the end of the book. My guess is there's only one more story.

Karl David, this was your baby from the start. You carried it on your back. I get the feeling it's time to end this phase. Does anyone else feel that way? (Several agreed.)

David I don't want to leave people hanging.

Liz I've got an idea.

Jose What is it?

Liz It's kind of radical.

Jose Now you've got to tell us.

Liz Some people have a lot of objections to Christianity. What if we invite them to bring their objections and we try to answer them.

David I like it.

Liz I was thinking we could put a stage in the downtown park. We'd get a lot more people showing up.

David I really like it.

Paul I heard about a Christian apologetics group that travels around doing debates. Maybe we could get them to come into town for a few weeks and help us.

David Wow, do I like it. They can stay with us. You don't mind, do you, Dad?

Ezra It's your house, son.

Owen Do you think we can get permission to use the park? We were almost kicked out of your own backyard, remember?

An older gentleman, Evan, stood up in the back of the crowd.

Evan You won't have any trouble getting permission from the fellow who issues that permit.

David Why is that?

Evan He works for me.

David Thank you, sir. Let's do it. I bet we can be up and running in a couple weeks. Whoever wants to help with planning, stick around after the meeting. Paul, I need to talk to you about these debaters right away.

Anna So, is this our last meeting here?

David I guess it is.

Sandra I'm feeling a little sad.

David This isn't the end. I hope every one of you comes to the park.

Latisha But it won't be like this.

David Of course. Some of you came as Christians and some became Christians. I'd like to hear from the rest of you, but if you don't want to share, that's fine.

Karl I'll go first. I joined this group because I'm David's friend and I thought it might be interesting. It was way more than I expected. I'm considering Christianity, but I need to do this gradually.

Jose When I started here, I had a lot of misconceptions. I learned a lot, and I know the Bible is true. So why am I not a Christian? I've got a couple issues still blocking my path.

Anna I can echo what Jose said about misconceptions. I learned a lot too. But when I leave this place, and I'm at work or around my family, I turn timid and all this seems unreal, like a dream. I'm not proud of that, but it's where I'm at for now.

Elliot You're probably wondering why I ever came here. I had questions, and I got some of them answered. I might come down to the park, but if I don't, thanks for putting up with me.

David Anyone else?

Elliot Come on, Tyler, you're joining a monastery, right?

Tyler I'll pass.

David Thanks for sharing. I understand each one needs time to process this. But please don't put it off. Life flies by, and before you know it you've got no time left to find God. Right, Hank?

Hank Don't get me started.

David Please accept my heartfelt thanks to everyone who was faithful to the covenant, which you are now released from. I could never have done it without you all. I guess that's it.

Karl stood up, and someone handed him a jumbo size thank you card.

Karl Hold on. We'll be done in a minute. Regardless of where our beliefs will land, I think it's safe to say these past few months have been an extraordinary experience for all of us. (Turning to Ezra.) On behalf of the whole group, thank you, Mr. Ruben, for recommending the book. And thank you for providing a special moment last Monday that none of us will ever forget. David, if it weren't for you, none of this would've happened. You modeled for us a passion for truth that would not be denied. Please accept this small token of our collective gratitude.

Karl handed the card to David. It had over a hundred signatures on it. David was speechless.

Ezra For the first time in his life, he doesn't know what to say. Good night, you dear people, and God bless. Don't forget to take home some leftovers!

As people were leaving, Karl said to David, "What was that about falling off a cliff?"

"Huh?"

"You said it during your baptism."

"Oh that. Um, maybe I'll tell you about it sometime."

Ezra told Karl, "Do you know what your friend spent most of yesterday doing, besides fasting? He wrote down a list of his sins until he filled a whole page. Some were thirty years old. He even asked me to help him remember. Then he confessed each one to God. Next, he knelt in the presence of God and grieved for a time. After that he took the list into the backyard and burned it, thanking Jesus for his forgiveness. Then he trotted back to the table, filled out another page, and repeated the whole process.

Karl smiled. "That sounds like the David I know."

David said meekly, "It gives me incentive never to do any of those things again. I wouldn't want to repeat that process every week."

Saturday morning, David and Ezra sat down over a pancake breakfast in David's kitchen. David said, "It's hard to believe what's happened in the last week. Seven days ago I was at one of the lowest points of my life."

"What turned it around?" asked Ezra.

David pointed to the ten-pound stone on his fireplace mantle. "Dad, I have a big favor to ask. I need someone to teach me about the Christian faith. Would you consider moving here and being my teacher? I'd love to have you live in my house."

Ezra set down his fork, wiped the corner of his eye, and whispered, "When it rains, it pours."

"Maybe that was too much to ask of you."

"Son, for you to ask me to live with you refreshes the spirit of this old Jew more than you can possibly know. However, I am not the right one to disciple you. We will find a good man to be your shepherd."

David suggested, "Maybe I can ask the pastor of the church I went to last week."

"You went to church last Sunday? This is a week of miracles."

“I’d still like you to move here, Dad. At least stay for the park meetings, won’t you?”

“I wouldn’t miss them for the world. Being around you makes me feel twenty years younger. Now David, tell me about your friend Anna.”

“I like her a lot.”

“Does she like you?”

“Seems to. She’s a good woman, but she isn’t a Christian. There’s no future for us until that changes, right?”

Ezra sighed, “As hard as that is to swallow, you are correct. You’ll have to wait and see what happens.”

“Waiting for someone I’m fond of to come to faith, that could be tough.”

Ezra sunk his fork into his pancake. “Tell me about it. David, did you know that Wednesday I had a nice chat with your friend Hank?”

“Cool. What did you talk about?”

“He’s a well-traveled man, been to Israel several times. He had a lot of questions about my faith. He seemed fascinated by the idea of a Jewish Christian.”

“Hank started coming near the beginning. He didn’t have much to say, mostly listened.”

Ezra said, “He told me he listened carefully. He had a bit of a Christian faith growing up, but abandoned it when he left home. Now he wants to find out if it’s real.”

“I’m glad you two were able to talk, Dad.”

“I invited him to join us at church. He said he’s not ready for that yet.”

The next morning, Ezra and David walked into the same church David had visited the previous weekend. After they found their seats, Jesse walked by and said, “David! Good to see you again.”

“Hello, Pastor. I’d like you to meet my father.”

Ezra put out his hand. “Pastor Jesse, I’m pleased to finally meet you. Sandra has told me good things about you.”

David was perplexed. “How do you know him?”

Just then Sandra walked up. “Hello, David, Mr. Ruben, Pastor.”

“Hello, Sandra,” replied Ezra. “Maybe you should tell David why you’re here and what’s been going on.”

“I’m here because this is my church, but you’re referring to the letters.”

“Letters?” David asked.

Sandra explained, “Soon after we began meeting at your house, someone suggested we pray for God’s hand on the meetings. For the last few months we met here at church Saturday mornings to pray, and Pastor Jesse often joined us.”

David stood up. “You were praying for our meetings every Saturday?”

Sandra smiled. “Someone found out your father was a believer and located his address. We thought he could join our prayers, in spirit if not in person. We exchanged a few letters. It was a delight last Wednesday to finally meet your father in person.”

Jesse added, “And those prayers got answered.”

“They did for some,” Sandra said, “but there are others too. We’re going to keep praying. This thing is far from over.”

David said, “I’ll be at the next prayer meeting. Pastor, when I talked to you last Sunday, did you know who I was?”

“No, but after you told me your name, I wondered whether you were that David. When Sandra told me about your new faith, I almost fainted for joy.”

“But you don’t know me.”

“You’re my new brother.”

“Pastor, I’d like to talk to you about some park meetings we’re planning. Can we meet after lunch?”

“Sure. But now it’s time to start the service.”

After lunch, David, Ezra, Jesse, and Sandra met in Pastor Jesse’s study. Paul joined them. Jesse asked David, “Would you pray before we start?”

“Gladly,” David said. “Father God, this is your work and we thank you for the honor of being a part of it. Please give us wisdom and guidance, as we plan these meetings. We ask in Jesus’ name, amen.”

Paul informed everyone that he got a commitment from three debaters from the ministry he had suggested. They decided the best nights were Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. The first meeting would be Wednesday in two and a half weeks, giving them time to advertise. Skeptics would be invited to bring their objections to Christianity. Every church in town would be encouraged to send members for moral support. Someone suggested having free coffee, juice, and cookies. Jesse thought he could get a few churches to pitch in and cover the expense.

Ezra said, “Since the debates start at seven, but wouldn’t it be great if the Christians could meet in the park beforehand, from six to seven?”

Jesse added. “It would be good for church unity, like the book of Acts, all the believers together.”

After the planning meeting, David asked Pastor Jesse if he would be willing to disciple him, and he said yes.

When everyone else had left, Paul commented to Jesse, “David could be a powerful evangelist someday. I just hope he remains loyal to the faith.”

“Do you have reason to think he will drift away?”

“No. David is as sincere as they get, but still—I’m sure you’ve seen it happen. There’s a bright flash of zeal that quickly dies away to nothing, like a match.”

Jesse agreed. “It’s always a concern.”

Paul said soberly, “I hope his new faith lasts, not only for his sake, but for the sake of everyone watching him.”

That same Sunday afternoon, Latisha was on the Vanberth campus sitting in a lecture hall. A religious group, new to the campus, had started holding their worship gatherings there. Thirty were in attendance. During the message, the speaker talked affectionately about the group’s founder, whom they called The Prophet.

After the meeting, Latisha told one of the regulars how much she enjoyed the group. “Everyone is so friendly and sincere. I liked the message since it was based so much on the Bible.”

“Thank you,” said the woman. “God gave The Prophet a unique understanding of the Bible. I’ve listened to lots of his lectures on tape, and I won’t trust anyone else to explain the word of God to me.”

Latisha told her, “I was going to this other group three evenings a week, but now that’s over. I like to mix and match what I hear from different places. I’ll see if I can get my husband and daughter to come.”

“Wonderful. We ask newcomers like you to pray that God speaks to your heart to show you whether this is the one true church.”

Next Saturday, David met with Pastor Jesse for his first discipleship session. “I’ve got a list of about two hundred questions I’d like to ask you.”

Jesse chuckled. “Two hundred. That’s funny.”

David opened up his three-ring binder. “I was hoping we could get through twenty-five each week.”

Jesse stared at the binder. “I thought you were making a joke. Okay, let’s get started, but first I better refill my coffee cup.”

After their meeting David said, “I saw Owen in church Sunday.”

“He’s been attending for a while. I know him well.”

“He sure knew a lot about Christianity.”

“Yes he does. He respects you, David, so I may enlist your help with him.”

“Why, what’s the problem?”

“We’ll talk about that another time. So, are you nervous about the park meetings?”

“When I started the meetings at my house, I was on my own, except for Karl. Now a lot of people are sharing the load, especially the Holy Spirit.”

# CHAPTER 19

## Wednesday

Eleven days later, David and his father arrived at the downtown city park at 5:30. It was a hot and sticky night. The location was ideal since it was right by downtown and a continual stream of people crossed the park. Large oaks lined the park's perimeter. In the center of the park they had installed a rented stage and public address system, with rows of folding chairs in front. At six o'clock the Christians met at a picnic shelter two hundred feet from the stage.

At 5:45 Paul arrived with the three men from the apologetics ministry, whom he had just picked up at the airport. Their names were Kevin, Troy, and Noah. Kevin explained to David and the rest how all three of them had a college degree in Christian apologetics, which has to do with explaining and defending the evidences for the Christian faith.

David commented "I didn't know you could get a college degree in that."

Troy replied, "Most people have no idea how much has been written on that topic."

People streamed in for the gathering of Christians, over a hundred of them. Some had been at David's meetings, but many others were new. They came from churches of various denominations in Ashbow and in neighboring towns.

At six o'clock, Pastor Jesse welcomed everyone and shared a few words. The first half hour was filled with songs, prayers, Scripture reading, and people sharing what God had done in their lives. The second half hour was a social time for people to visit. Many brought supper, and some brought extra food to share. The pastors in attendance marveled at the spirit of unity. Nothing like this had ever happened among the Ashbow churches.

As seven o'clock neared, they moved from the picnic area to the stage. About three hundred people were seated. Behind the seating area stood another fifty spectators who had stopped to listen while passing by.

David went onto the stage. "Good evening. Welcome to a continuation of the search for eternal life. Our three speakers will take turns fielding objections to Christianity. This is a mutual search for truth, and we hope participants from both sides will see it that way. The first person may come forward."

The first challenger stepped up to the microphone on the stage.

Challenger Christians say when they die, their body will be transformed into something totally different. Why should I believe something like that, totally without precedent?

Noah There is precedent. It's already happened to every one of us twice.

Chall Twice?

Noah The first time was when you were created in your mother's womb, and the second time was nine months later when you were born. Both were significant upgrades to your physical existence. Resurrection is a third upgrade.

Chall No one's ever seen a resurrection.

Noah Not true. Some have.

Chall I haven't. Another thing. You Christians keep warning of a final judgment, but it's always in the future.

Noah It's already happened. The history of Israel records many instances when God carried out his judgment, such as exiling the entire nation, twice.

Chall But how do we know this so called final judgment will be fair?

Noah It's already happened. The Bible lists numerous examples of God rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. It tells us what was done to deserve it, so we can see the fairness of it for ourselves.

Chall I don't believe those things happened.

Noah The nation of Israel says it happened. (Swinging his hand toward the listeners) The audience can decide which one to believe, you or them.

Chall You Christians keep promising Jesus will visibly appear, and again we keep waiting and waiting.

- Noah It's already happened. Jesus did come visibly two thousand years ago. Men touched him and ate with him. His first coming was physical, as will be his second coming.
- Chall And we're asked to accept by blind faith that Jesus will end all sickness and death.
- Noah It's already happened. Jesus healed multitudes and raised the dead during his first coming.
- Chall You're starting to sound like a broken record.
- Noah Everything God promises for the age to come, he has already done, including live among us. Our faith in what God promises for the future is based on what we know he did in the past. God promises a home for his people, and he already did that when he gave the Jews the land of Israel, after clearing out the Canaanites. In the same way, Christ will one day clear the Earth of his enemies and give it to his saints, so that the meek will inherit the Earth.
- Chall What you are proposing for Christ's second coming is on a global scale. When has that happened?
- Noah Noah's flood.
- Chall I consider that a myth. If the whole planet was buried by a flood, wouldn't you think someone would have noticed?
- Noah They did notice. It's an undisputed fact that legends of a great flood exist in many dozens of ancient cultures in six continents. The legends differ in some details because they were passed down orally, but most of them have a common theme of a world destroyed by water as punishment, with only a few being spared. Many also share details like a boat, pairs of animals, and a bird sent from the boat. This is the common memory of the world's tribes.
- Chall You said it was passed down orally. Those stories could have been corrupted twenty times during all those years.
- Noah Most of these tribes had no contact with each other for thousands of years, until recent centuries. Are you claiming that their myths all coincidentally corrupted into the same false story? By the way, there are no equivalent legends of the earth being destroyed by earthquakes, volcanoes, fires or meteorites.
- Chall I still don't think there was a flood.
- Noah Let me tell you the other common memory of all mankind. It is prevalent in even more ancient people groups, and is also spread through six continents—the creation story. Although details differ, most have these common elements: The first humans were created by a higher power and lived with him in paradise, but this was forfeited

due to human moral failure. Again, there are details that many versions have in common like a special tree and a snake. This is our family history, passed down to us by our forefathers. They were there; we were not. Any chance they might be right?

Chall Nah, I don't think so.

A new challenger came to the microphone with a different topic.

Challenger I bring up this topic, because this is being promoted as a sincere search for truth. Your Christian faith stresses the highest standards of integrity, love, and other virtues, correct?.

Kevin Correct. The Christian code of morality is second to none.

Chall Then you have a huge inconsistency to explain, because the history of the church is filled with horrendous violations of that Christian moral code. I'm talking about those who claim to be Christian, yet their lives deny what your faith teaches.

Kevin You sound pretty worked up about this.

Chall It's intolerable, people faithful in church attendance who stab you in the back once you leave the room.

Kevin These are called hypocrites. They don't practice what they profess.

Chall You're stalling.

Kevin You are bothered by hypocrites, but your indignation is a speck of dust compared to the mountain of indignation God has for such people. Much of the Bible is devoted to exhorting these traitors to reform, and promising them condemnation if they do not.

Chall Are you telling me God hates hypocrites more than I do? Aren't you always saying God loves sinners?

Kevin God loves it when sinners repent—when they stop being hypocrites.

Chall If God hates hypocrites, why is his church filled with them?

Kevin Because of God's mercy. He gives them a limited time to repent, which means stop being hypocrites, so they won't be swept away by his judgment.

Chall I think he's too lax.

Kevin You wish God to accelerate his timetable of judgment?

Chall No. I'd like people who call themselves Christians to act like it!

Kevin You are in complete agreement with God on that point.

Chall It doesn't look to me that he's too worried about it.

Kevin The Bible has many stories of God putting the unrepentant to death. And he has kept doing that up until today. You are blind to his judgments in our day, because you don't know him or his ways.

Chall If God is punishing them, he's way behind on his work.

Kevin Are you complaining about God's patience, that he is too merciful?

Chall This is a smokescreen to avoid explaining their crimes.

Kevin You lay the blame in the wrong place. It lies on those who disobey God. You ought to be rebuking them.

Chall While you do nothing about it.

Kevin On the contrary, we warn the disobedient, and if they won't repent, we shun them for the purpose of motivating them to reform.

Chall I don't think your system works.

Kevin Or perhaps it's the best possible system, but some still refuse to cooperate. Every class has students who do their assignments, and those who don't. A benevolent teacher doesn't quickly give up on the delinquents, while you demand they be flunked immediately. Hypocrites bother God far more than they bother you, but because his love dwarfs yours, he is willing to endure them for a season. Don't you realize how this same mercy is also giving you time to stop criticizing God and make your peace with him?

Chall What? I'm nothing like those hypocrites.

After the meeting, David spotted his cousin, Joseph, leaving the seating area. "Joseph, wait up!"

Joseph turned around. "Hi Cousin. I see you made the big time on stage."  
"It's not as glamorous as it looks."

"I talked to your dad earlier. He told me you're a Christian now. Have you told the relatives?"

"Not yet. I'm going to write them letters. What do you think about it?"

Joseph said, "It's cool. You know, when they talked about hypocrites, I kept thinking about the church in the Middle Ages hunting down Jews. Your guy brought up all the times the Bible describes God punishing hypocrites. My first thought was, they deserve it. Then it occurred to me that those weren't Gentile hypocrites being punished, those were Jewish hypocrites."

"That's honest thinking," David replied.

"It makes me think maybe I should read the Torah."

"Watch out. It'll change your life."

Joseph said. "We will see. Say, you seem different. You're smiling more than you used to."

Friday, July 2

At six o'clock the Christians came together to worship and hear testimonies. Jose entered the crowd and found David.

"Jose, nice to see you. It's been a few weeks. What's with the big grin on your face?"

Jose said, "I've got a favor to ask you, David. When you go home tonight, would you hang this necklace on the post in your backyard?"

David's eyes doubled in size. "Jose, don't joke with me."

"I'm not joking."

"What are you saying?"

"I've decided to follow Jesus."

David let out a shout and embraced his new brother. "We've got to tell everybody! Who else have you talked to?"

"You're the first one."

"I'm honored. What got you off the fence?"

Jose answered, "You know how someone said that we need to give God everything? There were some things I wasn't willing to give him, but then I decided to quit being an idiot."

David's face was beaming. "You sound like a wise man to me."

At seven o'clock, the debates got underway. There were more in attendance than had come two days earlier. David made the introductions and invited the first challenger to come forward.

**Challenger** Thank you for this opportunity. Everything you Christians believe in is based on one old book. No one can see God. You can't prove he exists.

**Troy** I believe God exists and is head of the universe, for the same reasons I believe our president exists and is head of the country.

**Chall** What are you talking about? We can see the president on television.

**Troy** I don't watch television.

**Chall** Do you read the newspaper?

**Troy** Are you implying that my faith in the president's existence can be based solely on something I read?

**Chall** Yes. I mean . . . no.

**Troy** Most people have never seen the president. How do they know he exists?

Chall A lot of people have seen him.

Troy Exactly. A lot of people have seen God. His name is Jesus.

Chall They saw a man; so what?

Troy That guy in the White House, maybe he's really the janitor.

Chall Hundreds of those close to him would know the difference.

Troy Hundreds of those close to Jesus would know the difference.

Chall Maybe it was just a few men who were close to Jesus, and they made up stories about him.

Troy Maybe just a few men in the White House have got the rest of us duped into thinking a janitor is the president.

Chall He's a very public figure.

Troy So was Jesus.

Chall This is different. The president is alive today, but Jesus lived two thousand years ago.

Troy So in a hundred years, we won't have any idea who was president at this time, or if he even existed. How about George Washington? Do you think he was once president?

Chall We have a lot more documented evidence about Washington than we have about Jesus.

Troy On the contrary, the volume of Christian literature about Jesus would utterly bury what's been written about Washington.

Chall Most of that was written long afterward.

Troy And so is what we have on Washington. The question is, how much was written by those close to him. For Jesus we have twenty-seven separate New Testament books and letters written by his contemporaries. Do you know how many we have for Washington?

Chall Um, no.

Troy So your confidence isn't based on the quantity of eyewitness accounts. Why are you sure he was president?

Chall I'm not the type to believe there was a mass conspiracy to fool later generations about our countries origins.

Troy Now apply that to Jesus.

Chall Granted, but Washington didn't claim to be God.

Troy That's only a difference in what the evidence shows. Is there any difference in the evidence itself?

Chall Incredible events demand more evidence.

- Troy That's a criteria you have arbitrarily imposed. It seems you have conceded that the evidence for your faith and mine are similar.
- Chall Couldn't someone have fabricated the stories of Jesus a couple generations later?
- Troy Suppose I tried to convince you and the audience that former president Kennedy claimed to be God, performed dozens of public miracles, and rose from the dead. How many would I convince?
- Chall That's different.
- Troy In other words, you think no one would fall for it. If I can't dupe anyone here with such a story about Kennedy, why are you so eager to believe it happened in the first century?
- Chall It could have happened. You can't prove it didn't.
- Troy The words of every first century witness point in the same direction. I go where the evidence points. You want to go anywhere *except* where the evidence points. Our audience can decide which of us is biased.
- Chall So do you believe every ancient myth?
- Troy No. Do you see anyone living thirty years among jungle tribes to bring them the message of Homer's Greek god's? It's not difficult at all to tell the difference between fables and the Bible.

The next challenger presented his case.

Challenger You guys asked for objections, right?

Noah Yes.

Chall I'm glad to oblige. You bigots are a bunch of arrogant, self-righteous hypocrites. You invent absurd rules and spread lies. You demean women, hate anyone different than you, and start wars. We don't want you in our schools, government, or our parks. Stay in your churches and keep the doors shut.

Noah You seem to know a lot about me. Have you been following me around?

Chall Ha ha. I'm talking about Christians.

Noah Then are your accusations directed at the Christians in this town, like those who meet over there at six o'clock. You sound like you are well acquainted with them.

Chall I wouldn't be caught dead around them.

Noah Then who are you accusing?

Chall Christians in general.

Noah So you must have spent time getting to know some Christians. Tell us about that.

Chall I avoid Christians, but I hear plenty about them.

Noah So you know them only through rumors. You make accusations against people whom you admit you don't know. Have you ever sat down to talk with them about how they live out their faith?

Chall Ask Christians to preach to me? You have got to be kidding!

Noah You despise all of them from afar only because they belong to a particular group. I believe that is called prejudice.

Chall That's ridiculous.

Noah Look over there in the audience, where most of the believers are sitting in one section. Can you cite specific examples where one of them demeaned a woman, spread lies, or started a war?

Chall I'm saying some Christians do that.

Noah Have you considered challenging the Christians who actually do such things? That would be much more constructive.

Chall I told you, I don't want to talk to them. And why do those Christians in the audience always sit with each other?

Noah Because they reeally like each other.

Chall Huh. Well, I bet your making a pile of money on these meetings.

Noah We aren't charging admission, we aren't taking an offering, and we're giving away coffee and cookies.

Chall Lots of Christians use their faith to suck money from the gullible.

Noah Certain scoundrels have done this, using Christianity as a cover. If you know of someone like that in Ashbow, perhaps you and I can pay them a visit and point out the error of their ways.

Chall Very funny. I'll leave that to you guys. So you won't admit to being full of hate?

Noah I'm going to embarrass my colleague Troy. He spent years in college getting a Ph.D. in aeronautical engineering. When he graduated, he followed God's leading into full time Christian ministry. Now he makes a fraction of the salary he could have, but does so gladly because he loves to tell people how to get into paradise. I've seen him around his family, friends, and co-workers, and can tell you he is a man of kindness, generosity, and patience. Even with your "helpful" accusations, I'm having trouble seeing the hate.

As the crowd dispersed, a young man standing in the back began talking with an older gentleman next to him.

“I got here late. How did it go?” asked the young man.

“You missed a spirited discussion.”

“I did hear them last Wednesday. I go to church, but I’m not exactly doing what the Bible tells me.”

“I graduated from seminary. Most scholars believe the Bible has many errors.”

“That’s a relief. I was worried I’d have to give up a few things.”

“Such as?” asked the older gentleman.

“Uh, not in mixed company.”

“Of course. Rest assured God loves you just as you are. The Bible promises this.”

The young man replied, “I thought the Bible can’t be trusted.”

“Most parts can’t be trusted, but the parts that talk about God’s unconditional love—those are correct.”

“I guess that makes sense, sort of. I like your message more than theirs. I can have fun here and still go to heaven.”

“Doesn’t that seem like the way God should be?”

## Sunday

The number of believers coming at six o’clock increased because that morning churches exhorted their members to support the outreach. During the testimony time, Jose stood before his new family and talked about his journey into the kingdom of God. He pointed to his wife and two children in the front row. “I didn’t do this just for me. I did it for them, so I can be a real husband and father. All my life I believed religion was a sham. I still believe that about religions, except for one, Christianity. What changed my mind? An honest look at the facts, and the help of dear friends.”

David and Ezra were visiting with Paul, Sandra, Owen, and Geoff. Sandra’s husband and daughter were also there, as was Paul’s father. They were discussing an article in the morning newspaper about the outreach.

Then Liz showed up. “I just got here. What was Jose doing up front?”

“Haven’t you heard? He finally accepted God’s invitation.”

Liz let out a high-pitched scream. “When did that happen?”

“A couple of days ago,” answered David. “He gave me his necklace to hang in my backyard.”

“This is awesome. Where is he?” Liz ran off to find Jose.

Paul mentioned, “That was good to hear.”

Owen tapped the side of his head. “Not for me. My ears are still ringing.”

David asked, “You mean about Jose?”

“Him too,” Paul said, “but I’m talking about Liz. One of the best indicators of a healthy faith is the level of a person’s delight when someone converts. The last thing you want to see is apathy.”

Geoff said, “I saw Barb in the crowd last Friday.”

Sandra perked up. “Did you really? I wonder if she’s still seeking or just curious. Maybe Mary’s letter softened her heart.”

At seven o’clock both parties took their positions.

Challenger Before I start, I want to apologize for the hostile attitude of the fellow who was up here last Friday. I hope you know most of us don’t feel that way toward Christians.

Kevin Yes, we know he represents a very tiny portion of non-Christians. Thank you so much for your kind words.

Chall You base everything on the Bible, but the books of the New Testament were picked by a small group of men in the fourth century. Should I trust the choice of a few who lived centuries after Jesus?

Kevin Do you have any proof that the New Testament books were not chosen until the fourth century?

Chall There was a church council that drew up a list.

Kevin What is your proof that before this time churches used other books?

Chall We don’t know what they were using.

Kevin That is not true, which I will show in a moment.

Chall There were other books around. They could have been using those.

Kevin Could have? Please produce your proof that the first century church was using different New Testament books than those we use today.

Chall I told you, we don’t know what they were using, but why else would they need a council if not to decide which books to keep and which to toss out?

Kevin Sir, are you married?

Chall Yes.

Kevin How long was your engagement?

Chall Two years. And your point?

Kevin According to your logic, during your two years of engagement, you were trying out many women, for why else would you need a wedding day if not to decide which woman to keep and which to toss out? (The crowd laughed.) Isn't it possible the church was using the same books all along, and the council was merely a recognition?

Chall It's possible, but we don't know what they were using.

Kevin I have good news. We know with certainty. A large number of letters, books, inscriptions, and translations from the end of the first century onward show us which books the early Christians considered Scripture. With this evidence, it's trivial to prove that the New Testament books never changed from the first century on.

Chall Isn't it true that some books were suppressed by the church?

Kevin Please produce the suppressed books.

Chall I can't because those books were suppressed and are gone.

Kevin So why do you believe it happened?

Chall Never mind.

Kevin It would have been impossible to suppress anything because the New Testament books were immediately spread throughout the Roman world and beyond. It was centuries before there existed a central church authority that could have done any suppression, and even then it didn't extend to every church.

Chall Maybe they used the same books from the beginning, but how can I be sure these were the right ones in the first place?

Kevin You are familiar with the amendments to our constitution.

Chall Of course.

Kevin As everyone knows, these were added over the years as they were approved by three-fourths of the states. What if the wrong amendments got added? What if the ones we live under now were invented by a few bureaucrats who slipped them in while no one was looking? Does this seem at all likely?

Chall No, but that's different.

Kevin It's not different. The Bible's books were selected through a similar public process by thousands of Christians in hundreds of churches throughout the Roman world and beyond. Those books were more sacred to them than the constitution is to us.

Chall You are asking me to trust a selection process I didn't witness.

Kevin You trust our country's amendment selection process, which you didn't witness, and no one in the audience would think you a fool for doing so. Yet you won't exercise the same confidence in your fellow man when it comes to the Bible. Could it be you don't want to submit to its demands, so you grope for some way to discredit it?

A woman gingerly approached the microphone.

Challenger You are promoting the chance to live forever. When I was young, that would've been attractive. Now that I'm old, life has worn me out. I'm not sure I want to live forever.

Troy You're not alone in feeling that way. Death appears to offer rest from life's troubles.

Chall It's like we're all on a long hike. When I was young I had lots of energy. Everything was new and fun. After a while the fun gets hollow. Eventually, all I can think of is sitting down to rest. I've tried life and I know it won't get better. Then someone says, good news, you get to hike forever. I'm tired. I don't want to hike forever.

Troy Are you aware of what God promises for the age to come?

Chall Go ahead, please tell me.

Troy (Opening his notebook) Scripture says believers will experience: joy, safety, health, peace, abundance, each other, fairness, pleasures, fruitful labor, love, comfort, hope, singing, beauty, treasures, cooperation, honesty, favor, prosperity, knowledge, purity, light, a home, feasting, responsibility, righteousness, family, self control, rejoicing, community, strength, faithfulness, blessing, glory, vigor, honor, nourishment, purpose, brotherhood, refreshment, rewards, and—of particular interest to you—both a renewed youth and a Sabbath rest.

Chall That's an impressive list, but I've tasted good things and sooner or later they turn bitter, or I become bored with them. If I could have everything my heart desires, it might keep me satisfied for thousands of years, but would it for eternity? Young people don't understand this, but as they get older they will.

Troy It's hard to picture the kind of life that would satisfy us forever, since none of us has ever experienced it. This is the only life we've ever known, and it's contaminated.

Chall Exactly. How do I know I will be happy forever?

Troy Let me tell you a story.

There was a young woman who grew up in the countryside. Although she enjoyed life, she also had seen her share of sorrows. When she was old enough, she moved to the city to reside with relatives and eke out a living.

Living in the city, she began to hear about the King's Son, the Prince. She heard remarkable stories of his good deeds on behalf of his subjects, some from long ago and some in recent times. In every story, the Prince was seen to be honest, patient, dependable, and loving. Furthermore, he was intelligent, fabulously rich, and in no danger of ever being ousted from his rule. He often demonstrated powers that were far beyond those of mankind. He knew what was best for people and what made them happy and at peace in the long run. He knew better than they knew themselves.

In the evenings, the young woman read the history of her people. There were accounts of virtuous men but also scoundrels, including some in the service of the King. But, the histories did not list a single incident of wrongdoing by either the King or the Prince. This matched what she heard about these two from those who were employed at the castle in her day.

In spite of this, some resented the rule of the King and his heir. They disliked his laws and complained that the King wasn't doing more for them. Some used him for jokes and some for cursing. But when asked to give one concrete example of a broken promise or of being cheated, they could not. Fault could easily be found among those who wore the Prince's badge, but when it came to the Prince, his reputation was spotless.

The young woman knew it didn't count for much if a man boasted of his own excellence. But here was someone who was praised by thousands who had met him. Then she discovered something else in the histories. The King and Prince had been around for at least four thousand years. *Who are these two?* And, their goodness did not diminish over time. What they were long ago is what they are today: perfect.

The young woman laughed. "What a catch that Prince would be for a husband." Of course, this was beyond ridiculous. Why would someone like that, virtually a god, be interested in an average looking, low-born, uncultured pauper like herself?

One morning, she was walking to her place of employment. She turned a corner, and there standing in front of her was the Prince himself. Although this was the first time she had ever seen him face to face, she knew immediately who he was. He matched exactly the descriptions she had read. His appearance and stature bore the unmistakable marks of royalty. Two thousand mounted soldiers were behind him. Not many come with an entourage like that.

The young woman was completely speechless. The Prince dismounted from his steed, walked forward, and got down on one knee. He gently took her hand and gazed into her eyes. She was shaking all over and barely kept from fainting. The Prince opened his mouth and said, "Beloved, (That was the woman's name.) I have come to ask you to be part of my bride. I love my bride and desire to share my life with her forever. I am immortal, and I have the power and desire to share my immortality with those I love. On our wedding day, one day in the future, I will replace this world filled with corruption and pain with my paradise, where you will live with me for all time."

At first Beloved's mind was numb, but she slowly regained her composure and asked, "What will my life be like in that new place?"

"I promise it will be very, very good, and you will be happy. Once you are there, you will never regret your decision. Beyond this I will tell you no more. I am asking you to trust me."

Beloved's mind started spinning as she thought of a thousand questions. Who else would be there, how would she spend her days, would she miss her old home, would the Prince still be perfect a million years from now? With his legendary patience, the Prince waited as Beloved considered the proposal. Finally she requested, "Could you give me a preview of my new home?"

The Prince answered, "I know you have heard a great deal about me from many witnesses. All these testify of me and what I have been like for thousands of years. This proposal is not about the place you will live or what you will do there. I am the Son of almighty God. It is a trivial thing for me to speak into existence whole worlds which you have never dreamed of. This proposal is about me. Will you trust me?"

Beloved reflected a little longer, and then she said, "I am not willing to trust you." She pulled her hand out of his, turned her back on him and began to walk away. With each step she took, her heart grew harder and darker. The path took her down a set of stairs. She misjudged the last step and her foot jerked underneath her.

The jerk of her leg caused Beloved to wake up, and she sat up in bed. After a few seconds she realized she had been dreaming. Then she began to scold herself. *Why would I dream such a ghastly thing? Does it reveal some dark side of me?* She could think of no reason under heaven to reject the Prince's offer. What did she have in this city that could remotely compare? Then she laughed about it. Such a fairy tale. Time to come back to reality.

Beloved got herself ready for work and left home. Walking down the path, she pinched herself repeatedly. *I'm sure I'm not dreaming now.* She turned a corner and suddenly froze in her tracks. There was the Prince right in front of her, with his army behind him. He dismounted, kneeled in front of Beloved, and took her hand in his.

Troy held a Bible over his head and called out to the crowd. "Listen, all you people. I told you a piece of fiction, but God and his Son are real. They have visited this world many times, which you can read about in this book. They still visit this world today. Ask one of us, God's servants. Jesus' offer is no less spectacular than the one made to Beloved, and it . . . is . . . no . . . fairy tale. This is why Christians fan out across the globe, forsaking everything to spread this extraordinary news, and why we're on this stage. This could be the day you turn the corner and come face to face with the Prince. Will you take God up on his offer? Will you trust him?"

Sitting at the back of the crowd, an old man buried his face in his hands. He wept and wept, as the sorrows of a lifetime were washed away by the love of God.

As the crowd dispersed, Anna walked up by the stage and found David. When he saw her, he said with a big smile, "Anna. It's so good to see you. It's been a while, too long."

She smiled too. "Hi David."

"What did you think of the program?"

"It was good."

"Say, did you hear? Jose became a Christian."

"Oh."

There was a silent pause, then David asked. "So, what's new?"

"Not much. I'm sure you want to know what I'm thinking about Christianity."

David waited silently.

"It's hard to explain. When I was in your backyard, or around you, I was focused and determined. But when I'm back in the real world, with my coworkers and family, it fizzles. I don't have enough of a backbone."

"I think you do."

Anna said, "Maybe. I don't know. Well, that's where I'm at."

David felt a tear coming. He didn't know what else to say.

"My ride is leaving. I'm going with friends to watch the fireworks."

David touched her shoulder. "Sure. I'll see you soon."

# CHAPTER 20

## Wednesday

David and Ezra arrived at the park early to pray with others for the meeting. David said, “I’ve got something to tell everyone after we pray.”

“Is it quick? Tell us now.”

“Last night someone tossed a rock through my window. It had a note tied to it. Someone isn’t happy with what’s going on here.”

Karl grimaced. “Not the picture window in your living room?”

“That’s the one,” Ezra said.

David added, “Here’s the cool part. Ever since, I haven’t been able to get this grin off my face.”

Troy said, “You’ve been reading Matthew five, haven’t you.”

“Um hmm.”

“What’s in Matthew five?” Karl asked.

Troy said, “When you’re persecuted for following Jesus, rejoice, and why is that, David?”

“It’s like a sign on the road saying, ‘Eternal Life Straight Ahead,’ since that is the same thing they did to Jesus and his disciples. I’m not glad for the person who did it because it means they’re an enemy of God, so I’ve been praying for them.”

Troy commended him. “You’re an example to us, David. Christians never take revenge. We leave that to God.”

Noah added, “That’s one way you can identify true believers. Christians are always the ones receiving persecution. They never dish it out. None of us is to speak a single disrespectful word about those who oppose us, not even in jest.”

At six o'clock, a man stood at the microphone in front of the believers and gave his story. "I went to church for years, but between Sundays I mostly did what I pleased. The pastor and leaders always spoke to the congregation as if everyone sitting in the pews was pleasing to God. They had no idea what I did during the week, and they didn't care. When the church announced the death of a member, we were always assured this person was now in heaven. Not once did the pastor imply that any regular attendee might not be saved. Thankfully, a friend of mine pointed out what Jesus really taught."

At 6:30, David, Paul, Sandra, and Jose saw Hank walk up.

"Hank!" shouted David. "What a pleasant surprise."

Hank looked Jose right in the eye. "I heard you repented. Any regrets?"

"My only regret is that I didn't repent sooner. I was way overdue."

Hank turned to David. "What about you?"

David pointed his arms at the stage and at the gathering of Christians.

"Does this answer your question?"

Hank shook his head up and down. "Well, okay then. I made my decision. I'm in."

The mouths of all four dropped open. Sandra said, "Hank, what do you mean by *in*?"

"I'm ready to follow Jesus. When can I get baptized?" There was great joy in that group as each one embraced their new brother in the faith.

Paul asked, "Tell us what happened!"

"By the last meeting at David's, I was sure who Jesus was, but I wasn't sure I could trust him. Did he really love me? Last Sunday I was sitting at the back, and my cold heart melted. He shed his blood for me, to wash away my lifetime of guilt. If that isn't enough—I've known about this since I was ten, but it took sixty-five years for it to sink through my thick skull."

Jose grabbed Hank's arm. "We've got to tell Liz. She will flip."

Sandra followed after them yelling, "Hank, turn down your hearing aid!" In a couple minutes, David and Paul heard a piercing scream from the other side of the crowd.

Paul smiled. "They found Liz."

At seven o'clock, a woman came onto the stage with her objections.

Challenger You want objections to Christianity. I'll start with the atrocities done by Christian nations.

Noah        There once was a nation of God’s people, Israel. The nations today are all under the power of the Devil and his antichrists. There are no Christian nations, but there is one Christian Church spread within the nations. Some nations adopt Christian words and customs. This doesn’t make them Christian, anymore than hanging a stethoscope on my neck makes me a doctor.

Chall      Fine, I’ll stick to the church. It’s guilty of plenty of horrors.

Noah      Excuse me. The topic of hypocrites was covered the other day.

Chall      Okay, I’ll stick with the Bible. It’s message is full of hate, like eternal punishment.

Noah      If hell were real and you were at risk of going there, would the message still be hateful?

Chall      No, but that’s irrelevant because the Bible is wrong.

Noah      Why do you say that?

Chall      Global floods, sticks turning into snakes, men swallowed by whales, God blinding people, demon possession. It’s nonsense.

Noah      I’m not following your logic.

Chall      How come we never see that today?

Noah      On the contrary, miracles *are* seen today among God’s people.

Chall      How convenient that only Christians see it.

Noah      God works miracles for those who ask him in faith. You don’t see them because you stay away from God’s people where he is revealing himself.

Chall      You always say God wants unbelievers to find him. Why is God hiding in the church, only doing miracles there?

Noah      The church is in plain sight, so he’s not hiding. God says if you want to see my works, come join my people, the church.

Chall      No thanks.

Noah      You claim that God seems absent, but it’s only because you won’t go through the door he’s opened. Do you have any other objections?

Chall      Yes. The Bible’s rules are offensive. It gives the death penalty just for cursing your parents. Imagine our country having that as a law.

Noah      Are you insisting God must align with modern western culture? Is it possible his moral values are different than yours?

Chall      Our culture is way more enlightened than the God of the Bible.

Noah      Perhaps God is more enlightened, and that’s why he seems so different. If mankind is corrupted, our judgment would be impaired.

Chall We're not corrupted. Another thing is birth defects, hunger, cancer. Why doesn't God fix these?

Noah You would only remove the symptoms. God's far superior plan deals with the root cause, our rebellion, as well as the symptoms.

Chall It doesn't make sense. If I were God, I would do it way differently.

Noah God created the vast complexities of the universe. His intellect is as superior to ours, as ours is to a grain of sand. He has been this way forever, while just a few years ago you were playing with blocks. How is it you don't grasp that God may do things differently than you would?

The next person presented his topic.

Challenger I believe in Jesus and go to church, but I don't follow the Bible to your extreme. What would you say about me?

Kevin Are you a disciple of Jesus?

Chall What's your definition of a disciple?

Kevin Among other things, a disciple lives by the Holy Spirit, joins with other believers, turns from sin, doesn't hate, prays, confesses Jesus' before men, worships Father and Son, endures hardship, does good deeds, forgives, doesn't love the world, hopes in Jesus' return, loves God with his whole heart and his neighbor as himself.

Chall Are you saying I have to do all that to be saved?

Kevin The Bible is saying it.

Chall I thought all I had to do was believe in Jesus.

Kevin What I just described *is* believing in Jesus.

Chall I thought it's just: believe I'm a sinner and Jesus died for my sins.

Kevin And the other things Jesus and the apostles told us to do?

Chall That's not the gospel. That comes afterward.

Kevin You conveniently draw a line between the easy and difficult parts and declare that only the former is the gospel.

Chall Smart theologians figured this out.

Kevin You've been conned.

Chall They've been saying this for centuries.

Kevin That same logic keeps millions trapped in false religions.

Chall The Bible says all over the place we are saved by believing Jesus' death paid for our sins.

Kevin No, it doesn't say that in even one place. The New Testament does say over sixty times that we are saved by believing in Jesus.

Chall Isn't that the same thing? No, I guess it isn't.

Kevin The New Testament uses many words, figures of speech, parables, stories, etc. to describe salvation. Out of all that, you have selected one word, faith, and with that word you take only one aspect, intellectual assent, and from that you further narrow it to assent only in Jesus' death and resurrection. You have hacked off ninety-nine percent of what we must do to be saved.

Chall I never thought of it that way. Don't you believe in grace?

Kevin We all start out as sinners, so we need God's grace to forgive us. That is why no one earns their way into heaven by works, because no one has lived a sinless life.

Chall I prayed a sinner's prayer years ago.

Kevin That was a good start. But if you search the Bible, you won't ever find the righteous described as those who said a sinner's prayer. What makes them righteous is they started doing God's will and continued doing it until the end.

Chall I've been told that doing God's will is something God does in us as a result of praying the sinner's prayer.

Kevin So are you doing God's will all the time?

Chall No. Should I pray the sinner's prayer again? Maybe it didn't take the first time.

Kevin What does God tell you to do in the Bible, in almost every chapter?

Chall Um, do his will?

Kevin There's your answer.

Chall I've been told my obedience has no effect on how God views me. If I think it does that would be misguided and harmful.

Kevin Does the Bible ever warn against trying to please God by obeying?

Chall I'm trying to think of a place. Maybe it does in a couple places.

Kevin How many times does the Bible tell us to obey God, or else?

Chall Hundreds.

Kevin There's your answer.

Chall I've been told it's impossible to obey God fully.

Kevin Do you get the feeling someone doesn't want you to obey God?

Chall They mean well.

Kevin Does the Bible ever teach that it's impossible to obey God?

- Chall It lists people's sins all the time, and says we are all sinners.
- Kevin It tells us sin is widespread. But where does the Bible teach we cannot obey God?
- Chall Not sure. But then why does no one obey God all the time?
- Kevin You don't know if that is true. Will that be your defense at the final judgment, that you assume everyone else was doing it?
- Chall It sure seems impossible.
- Kevin Jesus promised he would take away your sin and make you righteous. When you say it's impossible, you refute his words.
- Chall I still can't believe God expects me to be absolutely faithful, seven days a week.
- Kevin How many days a week are you faithful to your wife?
- Chall (A woman in the audience very loudly clears her throat.) Seven. Definitely seven.
- Kevin A lot of non-Christians have been duped into ignoring the Bible because a few men invented clever sounding arguments to discredit it. In the same way, a lot of people in the church have been duped into ignoring the Bible's commands because a few men invented clever sounding arguments. Some of God's enemies are outside the camp, others slithered into the church.
- Chall How can I know who is right?
- Kevin Take an hour or two each day until you've read the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation. In each section, ask this one question: What is needed for God's approval and to avoid his judgment? Take notes, but not too many. Notice how God treats each person, and why. Don't give any passage greater weight than others. Set aside all doctrinal preconceptions—come each day with a clean slate. Don't let other verses distort the plain meaning of the passage you're studying. When done, summarize your notes to reveal the main themes repeated throughout the Bible. You will be surprised when you see favorite doctrines barely discussed, while other seldom mentioned subjects are heavily emphasized.
- Chall Study and take notes on every chapter of the Bible? That could take months!
- Kevin Agreed. Do you want to get into paradise, or would you prefer to leave your soul in the hands of preachers who may be careless or even wolves in sheep's clothing?
- Chall Good point. Maybe I'll get started tomorrow.

As the meeting broke up, David and Ezra were chatting when Evelyn came out of the crowd. “Evelyn, nice to see you here. Let me introduce my father.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Ruben. It’s been a pleasure working with your son at Vanberth.”

Ezra said, “He’s spoken very highly of the school. So Evelyn, did you hear that David became a Christian?”

“Oh.”

David told her, “Why don’t you come to the believers gathering at six o’clock?”

“My pastor advised us not to. He said it was too divisive. So David, you didn’t take my advice.”

David said meekly, “I followed my conscience. What do you think of these debates?”

“It’s been intellectually stimulating, but I’m not sure what you’re trying to accomplish.”

“Turn people to God.”

Evelyn’s raised her pitch. “There are a lot of non-Christians in Ashbow. Don’t you realize how offensive this is to them.”

David wasn’t sure how to respond. Evelyn said goodbye and walked away.

After she left, Ezra said, “There are so many like her, respectable, accomplished, and well-mannered church members, who suppose they can serve God on their own terms. It’s hard for them to see why God would not approve of them, since by the standards of this culture they appear righteous. If they would only search the Scriptures and call out to God in humble prayer, their eyes would be opened. They don’t long for Jesus’ coming and are content with this warped world. When Jesus returns, they will be in for a dreadful shock.”

## Friday

Baptisms were scheduled to take place at six o’clock. A large tank was bought in and filled with water. As David was helping to get things ready, Karl walked up and asked, “Is it too late to sign up for a baptism?”

David already knew his friend was close to making a commitment. His face brightened as he said, “No, it’s not too late. Are you sure about this, Karl?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for weeks. I can’t point to one particular day when the light came on, but I know this is the only sensible choice.”

David was overjoyed. Karl handed him a small gift and card. David asked, “What is this?”

“It’s a thank you gift. If it weren’t for you, I’d still be ignorant of God and eternal life. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

Besides Karl, several others were baptized. One was a young man who grew up close to the Canadian border and had become an atheist in his teenage years. He had just finished his third year studying physics at Vanberth, and he was also on a sports team there. The friendship of Christian athletes warmed his heart and motivated him to seriously investigate for the first time the validity of the Christian faith. His atheism melted away in a few weeks, and he made a commitment to Christ that lasts until this day. Jose also was baptized. He made a bold statement of faith before the assembled believers. Finally, Hank was baptized. With tears, he thanked those involved in the meetings at David’s and thanked God who waited seventy-five years for him to return home.

Every day that passed meant the believers were one day closer to Jesus’ return, so there was joy and expectation. No one else associated with them at the six o’clock gathering, unless they were seeking God. The Christians were emboldened to share their faith with friends and family, and God kept adding to their number. All who made a public commitment to Christ were welcomed as brothers and sisters, regardless of their background.

At seven o’clock a man stepped onto the stage.

Challenger This evening, I’d like to discuss the many disagreements between science and the Bible.

Troy I like the topic. I studied science and engineering in graduate school. Which scientific viewpoint will you be comparing the Bible to? Today’s, or the viewpoint of five hundred years ago, or the one two thousand years ago?

Chall Why, today’s of course.

Troy So if we compared the Bible to the scientific understanding of five hundred years ago, would we find just as many disagreements?

Chall Not as many, I expect, but that wouldn’t be a valid comparison because we have corrected many errors since then.

Troy Five hundred years from now, science will have corrected many errors in the science of today, making today’s comparison invalid.

- Chall No, science will add to our knowledge, but they won't find errors in today's science.
- Troy That's amazing! In what year did science stop making errors and switch to only adding knowledge?
- Chall Okay, future scientists might find a few errors in our present scientific understanding, but not in the topics that refute the Bible.
- Troy Why would those topics have a special exemption from error?
- Chall Can we get on with comparing the Bible with science? That is, with the . . . nearly infallible science of today?
- Troy Go right ahead.
- Chall The Bible contains miracles, and science maintains that miracles are not possible.
- Troy Is that so? I took several semesters of math, physics, and engineering. I can't recall that ever being taught.
- Chall It's not in science books because it's understood.
- Troy I see. It's an article of faith, not proven by scientific methods.
- Chall It's not based on faith. It's based on science.
- Troy Then what calculation or experiment was used for the proof? Or can you cite a technical paper proving miracles are impossible?
- Chall We've proven what the laws of science are, and nature always obeys them.
- Troy The laws of science are not laws which can never be broken. They are only a description of how nature usually behaves. This is why science is ever changing. We think things work a certain way, but then we observe exceptions and we adjust the *laws*, proving they were never unbreakable *laws* in the first place.
- Chall But miracles cannot be repeated by scientific experiments, so there's no way to prove they exist.
- Troy You can't repeat a hurricane. Do you think their existence is proven?
- Chall Yes, because many people have seen them.
- Troy Same for miracles. If people have seen them, why does science ignore this evidence?
- Chall Because the evidence is proven to be fake.
- Troy Not true. Only a small percentage are ever proven to be fake. Most cannot be explained by the secular mind, so they assume the witness altered the story, or they propose an unknown explanation. They unscientifically ignore any data that goes against their bias.

- Chall When I hear about a so called miracle, my belief is that a scientific explanation will turn up some day in the future.
- Troy Maybe you should submit a technical paper proving that position. The opening line will be, “The evidence will appear in the future.” (The audience laughed)
- Chall (After taking a deep breath) I still maintain your beliefs are based on faith. Mine are based on scientific testing.
- Troy You believe in radio waves and DNA though you’ve never seen them. Others detected them, and you trust what they told you. That is exactly what I’ve done.
- Chall When I turn on the radio, my own experience proves what others discovered.
- Troy It’s the same with me. I experience the reality of God in my life, corroborating what others have discovered about him.
- Chall You are interpreting your experience to match your beliefs.
- Troy You don’t know me personally and know nothing about my experiences, yet just like that you were able to deduce that I have deluded myself.
- Chall I’ve seen too many people do it.
- Troy The same way you *saw* me do it? Is this how you accumulate your *evidence*, purely with assumptions?
- Chall Okay, maybe I don’t know in your case. You seem like an intelligent fellow.
- Troy Can science prove miracles are impossible?
- Chall No, but it tells us they are rare.
- Troy A fact the Bible agrees with. Those who witnessed them were astonished when they occurred.
- Chall If God wants us to find him, why doesn’t he do miracles when people ask, and prove his existence?
- Troy Proving his existence is not the problem God is trying to solve. God has given us more than enough proofs. Ask my friend David here. Once he set his heart on finding the truth, it only took him a few months to find proof for God. The real problem is our state of hostility against God’s rule, and it is from this condition that God wants to deliver us. Giving us miracles when we demand them only reinforces our rebellion, just as giving candy to a whining child only makes him more of a brat.

- Chall There are other disagreements between the Bible and science. For example, why does the Bible teach that the sun revolves around the Earth? It talks about the sun rising and setting.
- Troy Why do our newspapers list the time of sunrise and sunset? Is this all you have left, squeezing apparent contradictions out of figurative language?
- Chall There are other things in the Bible that science can prove are impossible.
- Troy The Bible is not a science textbook. It's a history book. Science possesses no time machine or any other measurement instrument that can prove a historical event did not occur.
- Chall I'll concede science can't disprove the past. But how do you explain that God never, ever shows up, like Moses parting the Red Sea?
- Troy Interesting. You gave as an example a time when God *did* show up.
- Chall I mean today, where I can see it.
- Troy So are you modifying your question to "Why does God never show up, to me?"
- Chall Me, or a non-Christian.
- Troy Let's say a non-Christian saw a miracle and told you, "God showed up to me, and the primary proof is that I'm a believer now. I'm convinced." Would you count that as God showing up?
- Chall Probably not.
- Troy You should. It seems you are really saying, "God never shows up—to me." This reduces the scope of where God doesn't show up by a factor of several billion, to which I'd reply, so what.
- Chall Let's move on. Science has proven that all living things gradually evolved through natural processes. The Bible says God created all life from nothing.
- Troy Before we discuss that, I would like to note that the alleged disagreements between the Bible and science currently stand at one.
- Chall Maybe, but it's a big one.
- Troy The biblical description of the origin of life is one of those historical events that science cannot disprove.
- Chall Technically yes, but science teaches us that the theory of evolution best fits the evidence.
- Troy Billions of people, including a great many scientists, disagree. Suppose we send men to Mars, and they find the remains of machines built with unknown technology. The unanimous opinion would be that they were put there by an intelligent, non-human life.

Theists look at the biological machines on planet Earth and instantly recognize they were put here by an intelligent, non-human life.

Chall The rest of us don't see it that way. We think the evidence for evolution is as plain as that for the Earth revolving around the Sun.

Troy Those two are not even in the same ballpark. The Earth's movement can be tested with repeatable experiments. Proving evolution is historical science. No repeatable experiments. It attempts to reconstruct a crime based on the physical evidence at the crime scene, which includes far more interpretation than testing gravity. You are putting a lot of faith in the interpretations of some scientists.

Chall But you are also using faith.

Troy The "You do it too" argument is probably the weakest of all. As for our faith, we are putting it in our star eyewitness, God, who was at the scene when it happened. He is the ideal witness, perfect in intellectual capacity and honesty.

Chall That's only if you assume the Bible contains God's words.

Troy Excuse me, sir, but nothing has been assumed. We have a group of sincere searchers sitting in the audience who just spent months examining this very question, using a logical and rational process. As a result, many of them changed their mind, and lifestyle, and came to believe that the Bible is historically accurate and contains the testimony of God.

Chall But I don't believe that.

Troy That's your choice. I reject the evolutionary theories of today's scientists because I have better evidence, someone who was there. You have the theories of science, which are always being updated. Up until one hundred and fifty years ago, science was even wrong about evolution, according to you. Science can only discredit the Bible if science is never wrong, which is the farthest thing from the truth.

Chall Science might have been wrong about evolution before, but we aren't now.

Troy Are you absolutely sure that evolution isn't one of those areas that science mishandled, only to be corrected in future generations?

Chall Pretty sure.

Troy Your scientists have misread the bones. I, and many scientists, believe what our star witness says, that he created us.

Chall I'll put my faith in my scientists.

After the meeting, David, Geoff, Paul and Sandra were talking. Geoff said, “I think evolution is real, but God guided the process, so I still believe he created us.”

Sandra said, “I’ve thought that too.”

Paul asked, “Do you think that happened over millions of years?” Both Geoff and Sandra nodded their heads yes. Paul glanced at David, who shrugged his shoulders and asked Paul to share what he thought.

“Many Christians believe God created all living things with a gradual evolutionary process that took millions of years. You would never get that from just reading the Bible. They think science has proven this gradual process, so they want to sync the Bible and science. When it comes to reconstructing the past, I agree with Troy that science is far less reliable than most people think it is. Personally, I don’t see where science has come anywhere close to proving a gradual evolving of life over millions of years. Is it wise for Christians to shoehorn the Genesis account into a potentially erroneous theory coming from unbelieving scientists, a theory that may have been concocted by the Devil himself?”

David remarked, “In other words, don’t be too quick to trust scientists on this topic. They might be one of those enemies of the faith.”

After Geoff departed, David pulled two gifts out and presented one each to Paul and Sandra. “I should have done this weeks ago. Both of you endured months at my house. Obviously, you came not for yourselves but to help others find eternal life, and more importantly the Creator. I cannot possibly repay you, but please accept this as a small token of my heartfelt appreciation.”

Paul answered, “The reward has been much greater than the small sacrifice we made.”

Sandra added, “God has used your search, David. Look at all the people who have come to Christ, and there will be more.”

“I’m sorry I’m going to miss it,” Paul said. “I haven’t mentioned this before, but months ago I made a commitment to a one-year mission trip. I leave in a few weeks.”

“Can you keep in touch?” David inquired.

“That could be difficult. I will be in a very remote area with no access to the outside world. It will be interesting to come back in a year and see what’s happened.”

# CHAPTER 21

## Sunday

Early Sunday afternoon, a group gathered inside a church near the park. An elderly man addressed them. "I've been asked to chair this meeting. Look around. We have atheists, Jews, Christians, Muslims and Buddhists. We are here because we share a concern over these meetings in the park with their radical form of Christianity. I've been watching the bunch that comes early at six PM, and the size grows every time. Our town's economy depends on the college and our tourist attractions. We can't afford negative press if this so called 'revival' keeps spreading."

Someone shouted, "It's spreading because we look like fools compared to those Christian debaters."

The chairman suggested, "They've been given too much from the secular flank. Let's send them challengers from a religious angle. Show everybody that these guys don't hold a monopoly on God."

"One other thing," added the chairman, "This David Ruben is their darling. It wouldn't hurt our cause if some dirt on him was leaked to the press."

Someone said, "I heard he may get fired from his teaching position at the college."

"That will help," said the chairman, "but that could take weeks to finalize. We need something now."

A man in the back called out, "I've got an angle. I'll talk to you alone after the meeting."

"Excellent," said the chairman, "Now let's hear some more ideas."

A few hours later, the believers came together in the park. People from Ashbow and the surrounding area continued turning to God and would join them, including not a few foreigners. The rest of the town was taking notice. Some were upset, while others were indifferent. A few took advantage of the crowds in the park by setting up booths to sell snacks and souvenirs.

During the testimony time before the believers, David came to the microphone. “Many of you know my story, how I started out searching for eternal life. Since I came to faith in Christ, I’ve come to realize more and more how that was just a carrot. It drew me to a much greater treasure, the living God. To know him and be his adopted son, is of far greater worth than the prize I initially set out to find.”

At seven a woman went up on the stage. Latisha and her daughter, a Vanberth student, sat in the front row, but not with the other Christians.

Challenger Good evening, sir. My topic is how to rightly understand the word of God.

Noah Good topic. Go ahead.

Chall Your people encourage us to study the Bible for ourselves, but that is risky. The Bible is hard to interpret.

Noah What do you suggest?

Chall God raised up a prophet in our day who is able to rightly perceive what God says in the Bible.

Noah Are you from that group that recently started meeting at Vanberth?

Chall We meet in a lecture hall at the college on Sunday afternoons. Everyone is welcome.

Noah I’m familiar with your group. Don’t you say that you are the only true Christians and the only ones rightly interpreting the Bible?

Chall We invite you to come and check us out.

Noah You mentioned a prophet who started your group.

Chall God gave this man wisdom, so we don’t have to rely on the Bible alone, which so many have misunderstood.

Noah So your prophet speaks in a way that is easy to understand.

Chall Yes. You will be amazed at his insights.

Noah Is he easier to understand than Jesus?

Chall Jesus was understood at one time, but after all these years and all the Bible translations, the message is garbled.

Noah Since when did translating an original change the original?

Chall The original has also changed.

Noah Who told you that?

Chall Our prophet. That's why we need him. Haven't you noticed the myriad of different opinions on the Bible?

Noah Since when did different opinions about an original change the original?

Chall Don't you believe God sends prophets?

Noah God sent many prophets through the Jews, up to and including Jesus and his apostles. Does your prophet's message line up with theirs?

Chall Of course.

Noah Then why do we need your prophet?

Chall He also has new revelation.

Noah Does it agree with what Jesus taught?

Chall Of course.

Noah Then why do we need your prophet?

Chall Our prophet helps us rightly handle the difficult words of Jesus. If you would come and listen to him, you would sense in your heart what a great man of God he is.

Noah (Pointing across the park) Has anyone from your group joined the Christians who gather over there at six o'clock?

Chall We were told not to associate with them.

Noah You all follow the same worn out pattern. A charismatic leader draws followers to himself. He questions the Bible and isolates his disciples from outsiders. Once the Bible and Christians are sidelined, this man assumes the role of God's sole mouthpiece and introduces his own doctrines. Finally, this self proclaimed prophet entombs his followers by flattering them with the delusion that they are the only true people of God, and everyone else is in error.

Another speaker moved toward the microphone.

Challenger I am a Buddhist. Thank you for this opportunity. In your Bible, God himself puts some people to death. Is that true?

Kevin Yes, there are quite a few cases of that.

Chall This is a major objection, because I find that barbaric.

Kevin Are you against the death penalty?

Chall Yes, I am against it.

Kevin God disagrees with you. He believes in capital punishment, like many governments. Are you denying God the right to choose his form of punishment?

Chall In some cases, a lot of people died who didn't deserve it.

Kevin Are you accusing God of executing the death penalty unfairly? That is a serious accusation against him.

Chall My point is that God wouldn't act like that.

Kevin How do you know?

Chall It's obvious that no person ever deserves the death penalty.

Kevin You call it obvious, but I call it your opinion. I suggest you consider the possibility that God's opinions may differ from yours.

Chall Here's another objection. Doesn't your Bible teach that God told the ancient Jews to capture the land of Palestine through warfare?

Kevin Yes. Do you have a problem with that?

Chall Of course. Any nation doing so today would be a violent aggressor.

Kevin God is the rightful ruler of this world since he created it, but men rebelled and followed his enemy, the Devil. Therefore, God would be in the right if he forcefully seized back the Earth. How much more does God have the right to recapture one small piece from those who stole it. For now, God mercifully offers us terms of surrender, but someday he will retake the rest of his planet by force, as he once did with the land of Israel.

Chall But why so much violence?

Kevin Is it God's fault? Put the blame where it belongs, on men who refuse to submit to the rule of their Creator. If we forbid the King from using force to stop evildoers, then we condemn the world to the reign of criminals.

Chall The God of the Bible isn't loving, always forecasting doom.

Kevin Have you ever had anything stolen from you?

Chall Yes, someone broke into my house and took my valuables.

Kevin Did the thief mail you a letter ahead of time, letting you know he was coming?

Chall He meant me harm; why would he warn me?

Kevin Exactly. The one who means you harm, will never warn you ahead of time. But God warns us because he wishes us to avoid harm. What you see as distasteful is actually love from God.

Chall Your faith teaches eternal punishment. How is that loving?

Kevin Consider a ghastly villain, guilty of the vilest acts against helpless women and children. Finally, this thug is captured and punished. Would the ending make you angry?

Chall I would think not, but that is different.

Kevin It is not different. In both cases justice is served. You are angry because you expect eternal punishment to be unfair. The real issue is that you don't believe the Lord is righteous, which doesn't surprise me since you are not a Christian.

Chall There is no way eternal punishment can be fair.

Kevin That's your opinion. Because I fear God, I leave it to him to determine the penalty, since he is infinitely more qualified to do so. However, neither God nor I want anyone to go to hell, which is why we are on this stage.

Chall Do you really believe some will end up in an overheated cave ruled by the Devil, while demons stab them with pitchforks?

Kevin A misconception of hell the Bible does not teach. God is the warden of hell. At the end of the age, he will hurl the Devil and all his demons into it, followed by all who reject God's authority.

Chall And you call that good news?

Kevin In eastern religions like yours, isn't it taught that the world has no beginning or end, repeating endless cycles for all eternity?

Chall More or less.

Kevin The history of mankind is filled with unbelievable atrocities. Eastern religions offer no hope that this pitiful situation will ever end because they have no deity with the desire, the power, or the backbone to put an end to evil. Hear now the good news! The creator of the universe will soon bring evil to an end, forever. In its place, he will set up a superb world without a shred of violence. It gets better. Every one of you is invited to this new world, and God appointed Jesus the Christ to bring you there. He is the only one with the authority to forgive your crimes by virtue of his blood, shed on the cross. He is the only one with the authority to give you the Holy Spirit who leads you away from your evil ways. And he is the only one appointed to rule over God's new kingdom, when he returns with great power and majesty. Now you see why every true Christian longs for that marvelous day. In your wildest dreams you could not invent good news better than this, which is why the promises of man-made religions pale in comparison.

Sandra had noticed Latisha and went up front after the debates to find her. When she arrived, David was already there. Latisha introduced them to her daughter. Latisha was holding a stack of cards with the time and location for the Sunday afternoon service of her new group.

David asked Latisha, "Have you come to many of these debates?"

"This is the first. I came to support Beth. She was the first one up there. Here, take this." She handed David and Sandra one of the cards she was carrying.

David and Sandra glanced at each other, then David asked, "Have you been going to this group's meetings?"

"Yes, every Sunday. My daughter visited for the first time earlier today. Both of you should come. I think you'd learn a lot."

David took a deep breath. "Maybe. Say, Latisha, have you thought about checking out the believer's gathering before the debates? It meets over there."

Latisha stared to one side.

Sandra jumped in. "Latisha, we got to know each other pretty well, and you know I care about you. What I want to say to you in love is . . . that group is a cult."

Latisha's daughter blurted out, "See, I told you mom! Even the guy on stage agreed."

Latisha's expression turned angry. "That is exactly what they told me you would say." She motioned to her daughter. "Come on. Your ride is leaving."

As they strode away, the daughter turned back and yelled, "When does that believer's gathering meet?"

"Six o'clock," shouted Sandra. She and David watched with disappointed faces as mother and daughter headed into the distance. Sandra remarked, "I can't say that I'm surprised. At least her daughter has some sense."

Sandra left and David was joined by Karl, Paul and Liz. Soon, two gentlemen approached. "Hello, Mr. Ruben. We are on the city council." David and the others looked concerned. "Don't worry. We support what you're doing here, but we came to warn you that some in the city government don't feel that way, so be careful."

"Thank you so much," David said, "but what should we watch out for?"

"This afternoon a councilman got potentially damaging information on you, David, from the police. They intended to go public with it, but there was enough support in the council to threaten legal action."

“I’m very grateful, but I wonder which policeman knows something about me.”

“It wasn’t a policeman. From what we could gather, the informant works at the downtown police station, and he attended the meetings at your house.”

The four of them looked at each other in disbelief, while Liz whispered, “That dirty rat.”

One councilman departed, while the other said, “I saw Pastor Jesse leading your get-togethers at six. I used to go to his church.”

“That’s great,” David said. “Are you attending another church?”

“No, I’ve been busy. I should go back. Like you guys say, we should make sure about going to heaven.”

Paul remarked, “You’re right, but we don’t generally talk about people going to heaven. We talk about Jesus bringing heaven here.”

“What do you mean here? Isn’t heaven up in the sky?”

“For now, yes, but an invasion is coming. All the institutions of men with their storied past and rich traditions will be flushed down the sewer drain.”

“What?” exclaimed the councilman. “Our great nation, my alma matter, my sports team, gone? Why?”

“Because they’re rotten to the core. The newspaper recently had a story of a house where someone died and wasn’t discovered for three weeks. Try as they might, they could not clean the stench of death from that place and in the end they had to bulldoze it to the ground.”

“When will this happen?”

Paul continued, “It could be centuries from now, or it could be tomorrow. Now do you see why Jesus warned us not to store up treasure here?”

“I think I’m guilty of that.”

“Why don’t you come to the six o’clock meeting next Wednesday?”

“I’ll be there. It’s sobering to think about the end of the world. Will the next world really be that much better?”

Karl pulled a paper from his Bible. “I just came across this in a Christian magazine. In the new earth, all these and much, much more will be gone: hospitals, fire trucks, cemeteries, prisons, mold, savage animals, tariffs, bombs, crop failures, immunizations, earthquakes, lawsuits, pollution, funeral homes, locked doors, crutches, genocide, seeing-eye dogs, border guards, cavities and false religions.”

Some departed, leaving only Karl and Paul. “Karl, you’ll be teaching other Christians before long, like David is starting to do.”

“Yeah, right.”

“God is using David powerfully right now, but remember it’s how you finish that counts.”

“What are you saying?” asked Karl.

“David’s growth has been dramatic while yours has been gradual, but the plant that puts down deep roots will last through times of testing.”

“Are you suggesting David is headed for a fall?”

“Not necessarily,” Paul said. “Many Christians run to the front of the pack and kept going strong, but I’ve seen others who started like him and their faith fizzled. Remember Cooper? I hope David is still zealous for God a year from now.”

## Wednesday

Shortly before six, Jose and his family entered the park. They passed a group of protesters carrying signs and chanting slogans against the Christians. When they reached the believers, Jose noticed a man in the distance staring in his direction. He was standing under a tree a couple hundred feet from the Christians. Jose ran over there. “Tyler! I haven’t seen you in weeks.”

“Hi, Jose,” Tyler said. “You got a minute to talk?”

“Sure. What’s going on?”

“I was at a funeral today.”

“I’m sorry,” consoled Jose. “Was it someone close?”

“It’s not about that. This was an elderly man I met a few times, a Mr. Peterson. During the funeral his pastor gave a eulogy. He told us how Mr. Peterson is now strolling down the gold paved streets of heaven. I couldn’t believe it. At the reception, I asked him how a man who hated Christianity could end up in the very heaven the Bible promises.”

“What did he say?”

“He told me, ‘Doesn’t the Bible say good people go to heaven?’ So I shot back, ‘If you’re going to use the Bible, you need to use all of it.’ He looked at me like I was from Mars.” Then Tyler smirked, “He even said all religions teach the same thing. I realized this guy believes whatever he wants to. You know, at one time I looked up to Mr. Peterson. Um, Jose, I need to say something, but could you keep it to yourself?”

“Of course.”

“I wasn’t very cooperative at David’s house. I wasn’t always there . . . for the right reason. I’m sorry.”

Jose smiled. “You’re forgiven. Did you hear I became a Christian?”

“Yeah. You can tell me about it another time. I am a long way from crossing this patch of grass to that group over there.”

Jose suggested, “How about next week I give you a call, and we go out for a slice of pizza.”

Tyler shook Jose’s hand. “Sounds okay. Talk to you next week.”

At ten minutes to seven, Geoff arrived at the audience seating area. Karl found him and said, “Geoff, we need to talk to you after the meeting.”

Geoff said nervously, “What about?”

“We’ll tell you then. Come up by the stage after it’s over.”

At seven o’clock, spectators were in their seats. By now there were five hundred a night. A young man came up onto the stage.

Challenger Hello. I am a seminary graduate student. I would like to discuss how to interpret the Bible. Do you take the Bible literally?

Troy Only as much as I take you literally. Tell me what you do to relax.

Chall I go down to the student lounge and hang out with my buddies. We play cards and crack jokes.

Troy Everyone here knew exactly what you meant. No one took *hang out* to mean dangling from ropes or *cracking jokes* to mean you use a hammer.

Chall So you don’t take the Bible literally?

Troy If you’re asking if the Bible employs figures of speech, of course it does, just like we do in everyday conversation.

Chall But how can you know whether a figure of speech is to be taken literally or not?

Troy Most of the time it’s obvious, like the example I just gave.

Chall That was a simple example. The Bible has numerous difficult passages which can be understood several ways. This is proven by the many interpretations that mankind has come up with.

Troy Or the many interpretations prove the creativity of rebellious and foolish men, assisted by God’s enemy the Devil, known for his cleverness.

- Chall I'm inclined to disagree. And there's no literal Devil. It's just a figure of speech.
- Troy Jesus told a parable about a fishing net which catches good and bad fish. On shore men sort the fish, keeping the good and discarding the bad. Jesus explained the parable, how at the end of the age angels will separate the wicked from the righteous, throwing the wicked into a fiery furnace. Was Jesus teaching here that everyone goes to heaven?
- Chall He could have been, since there are many ways to define the words *wicked* and *righteous*. Perhaps he meant that good will ultimately triumph over evil.
- Troy The parable is clear, but you turn it into meaningless mush, so you don't have to submit to the government of God.
- Chall Most scholars believe Jesus didn't actually say many of the parables in the Gospels. Someone added them in the second century.
- Troy I am aware of the many hollow arguments used to assign a late date to the New Testament books. Are you aware that these same arguments could "prove" that the American constitution was actually written at the time of the Civil War? Have your scholars tried this exercise?
- Chall They don't have time for that.
- Chall Such as an exercise would show an honest scholar whether he was deceiving himself with arguments that only appear convincing.
- Chall They're not deceived. I trust those scholars.
- Troy In the Bible a man named Korah openly defied God's prophet, Moses. Days later, the ground opened up beneath him and those who joined him, swallowing them alive and then closing over them. How would you interpret this passage?
- Chall It's been shown that the stories of Moses were written many centuries after he lived. And of course someone added the supernatural element to enhance the point.
- Troy You have a whole bag of excuses to draw from, each one repeating the serpent's words in the garden, "Did God really say?"
- Chall So do you believe everything in the Bible is easy to interpret?
- Troy No. Some passages aren't clear, and sincere believers will disagree on them. But the vast majority are clear, like the examples I gave.
- Chall I still think there's lots of ways to approach the Bible. It doesn't have to be only your way.

Troy If you are determined to trample on God's words, I cannot stop you. Listen, all you people, you in the crowd who truly seek God. Don't let men like this deceive you. Don't put your soul in their hands. Read the Bible for yourself, and you will see that God has made himself clear. One day you will stand before him and answer for your life. The empty theories of men like this will not protect you on that day.

Another man stepped forward.

Challenger Greetings. I am a Muslim.

Noah Peace be upon you. Were you here last Sunday for the first speaker?

Chall Yes.

Noah They talked about your prophet, Muhammad.

Chall I didn't hear him mentioned.

Noah He was a charismatic leader who came to supersede previous biblical revelation because it was inadequate and corrupt. He flattered his followers by declaring them to be the only true people of God. In terms of numbers, Muhammad has been the most successful lone prophet of them all.

Chall But the Bible and other religions have changed. This is why God sent our prophet, to reintroduce the true message of God.

Noah Muslims say Jesus never died and rose from the dead, correct?

Chall True. God took Jesus alive straight to heaven. He never died on the cross, and he was never resurrected.

Noah Let's look at what the early Christians said. All four gospels contain eyewitness descriptions of Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the dead. The book of Acts also proclaims his death and resurrection, as do many of the letters from Jesus' apostles. The ritual of communion, practiced by all Christians from the first century onward, has one purpose: to recall the death and resurrection of Jesus. Sir, why do you think this well documented event did not occur?

Chall Because our prophet said it didn't.

Noah On the one hand, we have the entire first century church, including many who saw it for themselves. On the other hand, we have one fellow who lived six hundred years later. (Noah extended his arm toward the crowd.) I will let the audience decide who to believe.

- Chall But a book is bound to change after being recopied over so many centuries.
- Noah Like what happened with the Quran.
- Chall Oh no. Not a single word of the Quran was ever changed during copying.
- Noah How about the communion ritual? Was that changed during copying?
- Chall The meaning of rituals can evolve over time.
- Noah Like the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, the Hajj?
- Chall Oh no. It's meaning never evolved from the day it was first observed.
- Noah Can you produce alternate versions of the Bible as proof that it has been changed?
- Chall Don't you Christians make the same claim about the Quran?
- Noah No, we don't. I have no problem believing that the words in the Quran actually came from the mouth of Muhammad.
- Chall Then why aren't you a Muslim?
- Noah Because the Quran doesn't say anything remarkable, like all non-Christian scriptures. It contains only the words of one more lone prophet who says God spoke to him, with little to prove that he actually did. This is why no one bothers attacking other scriptures. However, the Bible is in a class by itself because if the ground actually opened up to devour those who oppose God, then it obviously can't be ignored. So men either worship its God or grope for ways to discredit it.
- Chall If you read the Quran, your heart will tell you that Muslims are the true worshipers of God.
- Noah Why are Muslims unwilling to admit that Muhammad was a false prophet?
- Chall No Muslim man would dare call Muhammad, peace be upon him, a false prophet. He wouldn't be able to get a job or a wife. He would be disowned by his family and become an outcast in society. He probably would be beaten and might be killed as a heretic.
- Noah That explains why there are so many Muslims in the world.

Following the meeting, Geoff lingered at the back of the seating area. Some of his friends came by and said, "Geoff, we saw you hanging around that born again group. Are you one of them?"

Geoff answered, "No way. I must have been walking past them."

"We'll see you at the bar later?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

Right after they left, Karl showed up and said, "Come on, Geoff, we're waiting." They went behind the stage where David, Paul, and Sandra were standing.

"What's this all about?" Geoff said anxiously.

"We won't keep you in suspense," Paul said. "We were tipped off that someone working at the police station leaked damaging information about David to City Hall."

Geoff glanced around. "I don't know anything about it."

Sandra said, "Geoff, we know you live a double life, a friend of Christians and a friend of the world."

"What are you talking about?"

"Geoff, we say this in love. If Jesus returns tomorrow, or you have a heart attack, he would put you with the hypocrites."

"You're calling me a hypocrite?"

Paul said, "You want to look good before men, while you act as if God cannot see what is done in secret. Am I right?"

Geoff kept his mouth shut.

David urged him, "Geoff, think about your wife and children. This double life can only harm them. It's time to be a man and take a stand."

Geoff began to tremble. "They threatened to fire me if I didn't give them something. I'm sorry, David."

Karl yelled, "You sold out David for thirty pieces of silver? What good is your job if you lose your soul?"

Geoff hung his head.

David said, "I forgive you, but you have a much bigger problem. You need to get off the fence."

Sandra exhorted him, "Geoff, you have a heart that is open to God. We've all seen it. You can fix this. We are your friends, and we are ready to help any way we can."

Geoff was still staring at the ground. Then he walked silently into the gathering darkness, while the four of them watched.

# CHAPTER 22

## Friday

During the fellowship time at 6:30, a middle aged man asked Pastor Jesse and other leaders if they would pray for him. This fellow had a tumor on the back of his neck and had not gotten medical treatment since he was poor. The tumor was a large, discolored bump, the size of half a tennis ball. A group of believers gathered around and laid their hands on him, asking for God to heal him.

David was there praying, as was Hank, and they both had a clear view of the tumor as the man leaned his head forward. Those praying asked the Father to remove the tumor in Jesus' name, and the prayers went on for several minutes. Suddenly, in the space of a few seconds, the tumor shrank and disappeared, leaving healthy skin in its place. David let out a gasp. As others became aware of what happened, they began rejoicing and praising God with loud voices.

When Hank saw the tumor disappear, he was momentarily stunned. Then he stepped back and it began to sink in. He believed God existed, but now his reality was brought home like never before. At that moment, the Holy Spirit started to convict Hank of a life spent going his own way. He began shaking and fell to his knees. With loud moaning and tears, he confessed his sins against God.

The believers gathered around him. They put their hands on his shoulder, but there was little else to do except wait for the Holy Spirit to do his work. Hank felt as if he were kneeling directly in the presence of a pure and holy God. He shuddered as waves of remorse washed over him. Acknowledging a lifetime of shameful behavior, he begged Jesus to forgive him. After a few minutes, Hank quieted down, and a deep peace came over him and everyone around him. From that evening onward, there was a profound and lasting

change in that man's behavior. Those who had known him before were astounded by his new gentleness.

At seven, a woman stood before the microphone.

Challenger I'd like to comment on your religious views, which I think are too narrow. I believe in God and grew up going to church. In college I added ideas from Oriental and American Indian religions. It's made me a better person, and I'm enjoying life. Why would God be disappointed in me when my life is improving?

Kevin How do you know what kind of life God is pleased with?

Chall He wants me to be happy and not hurt anyone.

Kevin Let me tell a story.

A new school opened in an undeveloped country. Two families each sent their twelve-year-old son to the school. The first lad didn't pay attention to the teacher's instructions, except for shop class since he loved machines. He liked other subjects too but they weren't taught at school, so he brought his own books and read them while the teacher lectured. Because he was studying subjects he loved, he enjoyed his time at school. At home, he would tinker with machines instead of doing homework. The second lad paid close attention to the teacher's directions and completed the assigned homework. He didn't particularly enjoy the subjects, but he applied himself because it was the right thing to do.

One day, the second boy said to the first, "I can see you aren't doing the teacher's assignments. Don't you know you'll flunk and will have to repeat the whole year?"

The second boy said, "I'm getting good at fixing things. I'm happy, and I'm not hurting anyone. Why would the school flunk me for that?"

Chall That boy could make a good mechanic someday.

Kevin Hardly. He won't graduate from high school, and he refuses to do what he's told.

Chall I see a glass half full; you see a glass half empty. Why are you assuming God sees it your way?

Kevin It is you who assumes God will passively go along with whatever you desire. I have assumed nothing, but have searched to find where God has given us a syllabus defining the graduation requirements. We've all spent years in school and saw good and bad students.

The good students seek to please the school; the bad seek to please themselves.

- Chall But how do we know which religions have the graduation requirements? Maybe they all do.
- Kevin Figuring out which religions have God's instructions is not the hard part. Ask David and his friends. The problem is those who want to do their own thing.
- Chall Let's say I agree with you about Christianity. We still don't know which version of Jesus to follow, since the world is filled with different opinions about him.
- Kevin There are four biographies of Jesus written by four men in the first century. The opinions of men living in later centuries would never be allowed in a court of law.
- Chall Let's say I accept the biographies. All those good people being flunked. I don't like it.
- Kevin You think they're good people, while you care nothing for what God thinks of them or you, because you don't fear him.
- Chall It's too restrictive for a free spirit like me.
- Kevin God understands free spirits. You can trust him. His estate is vast, and you will never run out of fields to gallop in, but you have to stay within the fences he has placed.
- Chall (Walking off the stage) I like to place my own fences.

The next debater took his position.

- Challenger Good evening, everyone. I am a pastor at a church in Ashbow. The woman who was just up here is wise to be cautious about the Bible, because it has a lot of errors.
- Troy Do you use the Bible as the basis for your church's faith?
- Chall Of course. We are a Christian church.
- Troy How do you know which parts of the Bible can be trusted?
- Chall I take everything in it with a grain of salt. I use my common sense to discern what parts reflect God's teaching.
- Troy Does your congregation know that the words of Moses, Jesus and Paul and are being filtered through your common sense?
- Chall They compliment me on my preaching.
- Troy Why do you view the entire Bible with suspicion?
- Chall If a story has mistakes, then I doubt all of its credibility.

Troy Let's test your theory. A close friend of yours suddenly approaches the stage and shouts, "Your house and garage are on fire. I just drove by it two minutes ago and saw a fire truck pulling up." You immediately see two errors in his story. You don't have a garage, and your house is at least five minutes from here at top speed. Do you drop your microphone and race home? Or do you stay here, doubting all of the stories credibility?

Chall I'd go home.

Troy What about the errors?

Chall Maybe the neighbor's garage was also on fire and he assumed it was mine. Maybe he's not good at judging time.

Troy Here's another example. Suppose your grandfather fought in D-Day, the invasion of Nazi controlled France in 1944. He's relating the story of that day but uses the wrong name for the beach he landed on. He also gives the wrong date, June 4. Would you think that he never hit the beach that day?

Chall No.

Troy Don't his mistakes raise doubts, so you'd be tempted to think that the entire D-Day invasion never took place?

Chall What's your point?

Troy Men do this with the Bible. They are told events as momentous as D-Day occurred, but they deny the whole thing ever happened only because they think they found a minor irregularity. In the Noah's ark story, if you found an inconsistency in how many days it rained, or how many pairs of animals were on the boat, would you think you could throw out the entire global flood?

Chall I guess not. Are you admitting to minor errors in the Bible? Your two examples had them.

Troy No. I don't see the errors in the Bible that you allege. But the point of my two examples is that even if there are minor errors, you would still believe your house is on fire and still believe D-Day took place. Therefore, whether one believes there are minor errors or not, the honest person's response to the Bible should be the same. The dishonest thinks minor errors give them license to distrust the whole thing.

Chall Your logic doesn't apply to the Bible, because it claims to be the word of God. If I find one mistake in it, then it can't be from God.

Troy Let me tell you a story.

A man was on a journey, and he stopped at an inn to lodge overnight. Sitting by the fire after supper, he conversed with a band of twelve men also staying there. These twelve related in detail the words and deeds of their Master, with whom they had lived the last three years. “We saw him die in public, but later we all saw him alive. He offers eternal life to all who believe in him.”

The stranger replied with delight, “You have given me no reason to doubt all twelve of you. I’m sure you know when a man is walking on water or not, and I have no doubt that you can tell the difference between a dead man and one who is alive. I will gladly join you and become his disciple.”

The twelve said, “Wonderful! Our Master gave us the word of God, so we will teach you the changes that God requires in your lifestyle.”

“Changes?” The stranger’s smile disappeared. “Did you say word of God? I noticed minor contradictions in your stories. Some names, numbers, and dates do not line up as precisely as I think they should. I’m having second thoughts.”

The twelve were astounded. “We saw him give sight to the blind. He ascended into the clouds before our eyes. You didn’t doubt us at first.”

The stranger continued, “Correct. But now that you claim your stories are the word of God, I have decided to use an entirely different standard.”

They were astonished. “Do you now doubt all we have told you?”

“With my new perspective, I feel free to question everything. I changed my mind, and now I think you probably cannot tell a dead man from one who is living.”

After the debates ended, David and Liz were by the stage when they saw Hank bringing Elliot with him. Hank said, “Look who I found.”

David put out his hand. “Elliot! How have you been?”

“Not too bad.”

“Have you been coming to these?”

“Just a couple.”

“So what do you think?” Liz asked.

“I haven’t changed my mind, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

Hank said, “This might change it,” and he described the healing miracle he had witnessed earlier.

Elliot seemed unmoved and asked David, “Did you see it?”

“Yes. Just like Hank described it.”

“How about you, Liz?”

“Not directly, but it was clear from people’s reactions what happened. This is proof.”

“Did anyone take a video?”

David responded, “No, but our word is better than a video, because a video can be edited. You know us and you know we aren’t gullible. We can bring you to the man who was healed.”

With a condescending smile, Elliot said, “I know you mean well.”

David became agitated. “You never thought we were deceivers before.”

“I’m not saying you’re lying.”

“This thing was the size of half an orange!”

Liz asked, “What would it take to convince you, Elliot?”

“If I saw it myself.”

Hank said, “Please, Elliot, why won’t you believe us?”

“Isn’t it suspicious that everyone else sees these things but me?”

Hank said gently, “Humor me for a minute. Isn’t it possible that miracles are rare, which is why only some people see them?”

“It’s possible.”

“Thanks. It would be to our advantage that they are rare because then it points more clearly to the hand of God behind them.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Good, good.” Hank continued. “Now isn’t it perhaps possible that God is showing himself to you through us?”

Elliot said, “That might work for you guys, but not for me.”

David said quietly, “Any chance you might be wrong?”

“I’ll think about it. Say Hank, what happened to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re so . . . meek and mild. What happened to the blunt old codger we all knew?”

Hank replied, “He’s dead. That’s another miracle.”

Liz added, “A miracle you *were* given the privilege of seeing for yourself. This one you can’t so easily wave off.”

The next day, on Saturday morning, David, Paul, and Karl stood on the sidewalk in front of an apartment building. David said, “Are you sure this is the right thing to do?”

Karl answered, “My dad was in the military and they had a saying, ‘We leave no man behind.’ ”

“You’re right. At least we have to try.”

They went inside and knocked on a door. Cooper opened it, and with a surprised look said, “Gentlemen. Good morning. To what do I owe this unexpected visit?”

David asked, “Do you mind if we come inside?” Cooper brought them into his living room.

After a few pleasantries, Karl said, “Did you know that David and I came to faith in Christ?”

“I figured as much, with what I’ve heard about your escapades in the park. I haven’t gotten down there myself.”

David said, “Cooper, you left the group rather suddenly. We’re concerned for your faith and stopped by to see if there’s anything we can do to help.”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you still a Christian?”

Cooper smiled. “You get right to the point, don’t you David. Let’s see. Am I still a Christian? I’m not sure I would use that exact term, but I still believe in God.”

“Which one?”

“That’s good. It’s probably not the same one you believe in.”

“Are you going to church anywhere?” Karl asked.

“Nope.”

Paul said, “Jesus was at work in David’s yard and the fruit of his work is sitting right in front of you, but you withdrew. Now the Holy Spirit is doing amazing things at the park, but you’re staying away. You are drifting from Christ. Do you have a grudge against the church?”

“Maybe,” Cooper said. “Why worry about me, Paul? Focus on these new guys.”

“These two are heading deeper into the kingdom of God. You’re heading out of it.”

“I don’t need the church to serve God.”

“You are mistaken,” Paul said. “If you shun those whom Christ loves, you shun Christ.”

Cooper’s voice rose. “I’m not so sure Christ loves everyone in the church, not the way some of those clowns act.”

“Would you like to talk about it?” David inquired.

“No way.”

“Did you hear that Jose became a Christian?” Karl said.

“No, I didn’t. How interesting.”

“He wanted to come with us, but he thought it would be better for you if he didn’t. He sends his apology for quarreling with you.”

“Tell him apology accepted. Sounds like his conversion is genuine.”

David suggested, “Why don’t you come to the park at six tomorrow. There’s a huge gathering of Christians from all over Ashbow.”

“That sounds like just the place I want to stay away from.”

Paul warned, “If Jesus returns tomorrow, or you have a heart attack, you might be considered a deserter.”

Cooper smirked. “A deserter, huh? That’s my concern. Now if you will excuse me, I have several projects I’m working on.”

## Sunday

At six o’clock, hundreds of believers streamed into the park from all directions. In remembrance of their Lord’s death, they held a solemn communion service. David was surrounded by Ezra, Karl, Paul with his father, Sandra with her husband, Liz, Jose with his family, and Hank. Sandra said, “Some-day we will all be together with Mary, enjoying God’s beautiful new earth forevermore.”

Pastor Jesse approached and put his hand on David’s shoulder. “He’s here.” Paul and David followed Jesse to the other side of the crowd where Owen was joking with friends. They told him, “Owen, we’d like to talk to you in private,” and they moved to another area of the park.

Jesse started, “Owen, we’ve talked before about your faith. Since there’s been no change, I brought two of your friends.”

Owen was surprised. “What’s the problem?”

David said, “It’s the sin you tolerate in your life. You don’t even try to hide it.”

“We’re all sinners. As long as I know Jesus forgives me, I’m okay.”

“Owen, we’ve been over this,” Jesse said. “Jesus came to take away our sin.”

“God will stop my sinning after I die.”

Paul said, “Now is when God calls us to turn from evil. It’s too late at his coming.”

“Are you denying God’s grace? Are you saying Jesus doesn’t love me?”

“Owen, why won’t you give up your sin? Have you tried?”

“We’re not saved by works. If I try to stop on my own, I’d be insulting the cross of Christ.”

Jesse said, “You insult the cross by continuing in sin. Jesus died to deliver you from sin, not give you an excuse to keep doing it.”

“We can’t stop sinning. Only God can stop it.”

“Are you saying it’s God’s fault?”

Owen said. “If he thought it was as important as you guys do, he’d stop it. Besides, haven’t you ever read that we are saved by faith alone?”

Paul told him, “The Bible doesn’t use the words *faith alone* together.”

Jesse corrected him, “Actually, there is one verse.”

“See!” Owen yelled.

“The verse says, ‘a person is considered righteous by what they do and *not* by faith alone.’ ”

“Oh,” Owen said. “Well, God’s love is unconditional. And sinning is in our nature. As the Bible says, ‘All have sinned.’ ”

“It says, ‘All have sinned,’ not ‘All have *to* sin.’ ”

Owen kept at it. “You are trying to be saved by the works of the Law.”

Paul answered, “We are not asking you to keep the Old Testament Law.”

“Trying to please God with my obedience could lead to pride and boasting.”

“So why did Jesus give us his commands, Owen?”

“They’re to show us that we cannot keep them, so we see our need for the cross of Christ.”

“What?” David said. “You think Jesus gave us his commands, expecting we would not obey them?”

“Yes. Haven’t you read that all our righteous acts are like filthy rags to God?”

“You are seriously misusing that verse,” Paul said.

Owen continued, “If I tried to obey, it wouldn’t be valid since I’d be doing it in my own strength.”

David was astounded. “Obedience doesn’t count if I do it myself? Where do you come up with this stuff?”

Jesse explained, “He’s parroting popular ideas.”

Owen said, “These ideas are from respected men of God. Jesus imputes his righteousness, so when God looks at me, he doesn’t see my sin.”

Paul countered, “Jesus makes us righteous as the Holy Spirit leads us to do what is right.”

“The Bible says no one is righteous. And I told you I can’t stop.”

Jesse replied, “It’s not can’t, it’s won’t.”

“I don’t have to be holy, because Jesus lived a blameless life in my place.”

Jesse looked at Paul, “This could go on all day.”

Owen continued, “Salvation is a gift. God won’t take it back, no matter what. David, why do you keep sticking your fingers out?”

“I’m counting your excuses, and I’m on the fourth hand.”

Jesse said, “Owen, did you hear what he said? Why are you groping for excuses to hold onto your sin? This is not what faith in Christ is about.”

Owen turned red. “Are you saying I’m not saved?”

“Repentance is a condition of salvation.”

“I feel sorry when I sin.”

“You haven’t stopped, which makes you unrepentant. If Jesus returns tomorrow, or you have a heart attack, you could be put with the unbelievers.”

Owen shouted, “You’re calling me unrepentant?”

Jesse continued, “Many of Jesus’ parables have a common theme of someone being shut out of the kingdom of God. Do you know why?”

“Because they didn’t know how much Jesus loved them?”

“That was never mentioned. The reasons given were disobedience, bearing no fruit, and practicing wickedness. Doesn’t that concern you?”

“No. I’m trusting in God’s mercy.”

David said gently, “Any chance you might be wrong?”

Owen got angry. “I’m offended.” Then he stormed out of the park.

Jesses sighed, “He had so many rebuttals in his bag. The sheer number of them reinforces his deception.”

Paul agreed, “We saw the same thing in a couple of the stories in David’s book. Enemies of the faith have had centuries to devise a great number of rebuttals.”

David wept. Paul encouraged him, “It’s not over. He might still see the light.”

“It’s not just him. That’s the fifth friend I’ve seen walk away from the Lord in the last week.”

Paul said. “It is painful, but we have to stay strong for the sake of those who do value their soul.”

David walked slowly to the stage where Troy, Noah, and Kevin were waiting. Kevin said, “Hi, David. We’ve been praying and we think you should take one of the challenges tonight.”

David replied, “This is not a good time. I don’t have anything to give.”

Troy explained, “David, since you’re a young Christian, you are still learning the ways of the Lord. He often works most powerfully through us when we feel the weakest.”

“If you think it’s what the Lord wants. What’s the topic?”

“We don’t know until the challenger steps up.”

David said. “Can I take the second one?”

“Sure. Come sit on the stage with us.”

As David sat down, he looked over and saw his father also sitting on the stage. They both said at the same time, “What are you doing here?”

The first challenger ascended the stage.

Challenger Hello. My topic this evening is the problem of evil.

Noah An important topic. By evil do you mean an injustice has been perpetrated?

Chall Yes.

Noah So if I am suffering, or I don’t get what I want, is that always evil?

Chall No. Often it’s our own fault, or we have childish expectations.

Noah Agreed. So evil, as you’re defining it, requires one party to wrong another. What is your objection?

Chall If God is good and all-powerful, how can there be evil in the world? Therefore, the presence of evil proves God does not exist.

Noah I don’t see the logical connection. (Pointing to David) If I steal your vehicle, how does that make David an illusion?

Chall He can’t stop the theft, but God could.

Noah He maybe could stop it, but he may have a valid reason not to at this time.

Chall What reason could possibly be valid?

Noah Do you have children?

Chall Yes.

Noah Do they ever do anything wrong?

Chall Occasionally.

Noah Why aren’t you stopping it? Either you are a bad person, or you don’t exist.

Chall I can’t stop them all the time.

Noah Sure you can. Strap them to their beds. They wouldn’t get into any more mischief.

- Chall That would be cruel.
- Noah But it would stop their evil. Aren't you insisting this is the only right thing to do?
- Chall I'd rather train them to be a good person, even if it allows some mischief for a time.
- Noah I rest my case.
- Chall But it's different with God.
- Noah I will let the audience decide if there is a difference.
- Chall I'm not allowing people to drop bombs on each other.
- Noah We are doing that to ourselves. Why are you blaming God? Can you name a single wrong God has done to us?
- Chall There are plenty of good things God should be doing, but isn't. This proves he cannot exist, at least the Christian version.
- Noah The Christian version is a God who is good and who also allows evil in his universe for a limited time. You pick a non-Christian version of God, thinking this proves your point.
- Chall I know how a good God should act.
- Noah Your real objection is not about evil but God's guilt or innocence. You claim the evidence convicts him.
- Chall True. Are you going to argue for his innocence?
- Noah I will answer with a story.

One day an eight year old boy walked into the White House, proceeding all the way to the president's desk. When the president looked up, the boy addressed him. "Sir, I have several complaints. First of all, the bench at the ball field is full of slivers and the outfield is littered with potholes. At school bullies pick on me, and the math lessons are boring. My dog is sick, but dad says the vet costs too much. My older brother never plays with me. As a result of these evils, I have arrived at a verdict for your administration—guilty. My sister says this suggests that you don't exist, but since I can see you sitting right in front of me, I say it proves that you are not good. Consequently, I will be disregarding your laws and looking elsewhere for leadership and national defense. Good day, sir." The lad marched out of the office.

- Noah What makes this tale preposterous? This boy lacks four things needed to pass judgment: information, mental capacity, moral capacity, and authority. It is the same between us and God. For any human to even attempt judgment of God is the height of absurdity.

Chall I'm not allowed to judge whether God is doing his job properly?

Noah Have you followed God around since the creation of the world? Is your sense of morality perfect, devoid of all bias? In other words, can you issue an informed ruling with flawless justice? If not, then you have no business assigning God a grade.

Chall Just because I can't do it perfectly? That's not fair.

Noah Are you really interested in fairness, or are you just an angry son who ran away from home, blaming his parents for all his troubles?

Chall Someone's got to speak up about the world's atrocities.

Noah God has been working to stop evil since the dawn of mankind. Instead of fighting him, I suggest you cooperate with him by joining us his servants and fighting evil God's way. You do that by first addressing the evil in yourself, or else God will do it on the day of judgment.

Chall I find the idea of a final judgment absurd.

Noah I thought you were in favor of judgment. You defend your right to judge God, but you scoff at God's right to judge the world.

Chall You're stalling. In spite of your many words, the problem of evil is still unsolved.

Noah I have great news! The problem of evil has been solved. God has a fantastic plan, already in process through the gospel, and in the age to come evil will be gone forever.

Chall That's great for then, but what about now?

Noah Jesus is coming back to complete the job, so the day of evil's departure is getting closer and closer. It might be next week.

Chall Next week?

Noah Since you are so anxious for God to stop evil, I expect you are eagerly awaiting his appearing.

Chall I wouldn't say that.

Noah Here's the best part. God could have strapped us to our beds, or repaid us what we deserved. But because he loves the world, he sent his Son to pardon us and also turn us away from evil, so that those who cooperate with him can live forever in a world without evil. Do you still think God is not good?

Chall I'll think about it.

Noah Very good, but don't wait too long. On the day the Lord Jesus comes from the sky in blazing fire with his powerful angels, his offer comes off the table.

The next man approached the microphone slowly, while David did the same, clutching his Bible.

Rabbi Good evening, young man. I am the Rabbi from Temple Israel, an Ashbow synagogue.

David It's a pleasure to meet you, Rabbi. I visited Temple Israel once for a special event.

Rabbi Are you Jewish?

David I am Jewish, and I am a Christian. My name is David Ruben.

Rabbi Oh, that David. A Jewish Christian. How interesting. The topic I would like to discuss is the exclusiveness of Christianity. Some Christians claim that theirs is the only authentic religion. As we all know, Christianity is well established in some parts of the world and unknown in other parts. If Christianity is the only source of spiritual truth, how do you explain this gross inequity?

David You are asking why Christianity did not spread evenly. We know people are predominantly not loners but are wired to think as a tribe, and once tribal traditions are established they don't change easily. Some tribes, or nations, accepted the gospel while others didn't, and now the concrete has hardened.

Rabbi Then those areas that rejected the gospel don't have a chance to know God.

David They can know God since he has shown himself to all mankind through the witness of his creation and our conscience.

Rabbi Perhaps, but those in Christian countries have an advantage.

David All kinds of vital knowledge are unevenly distributed around the world. We never use that fact as a test of its truthfulness, so why do it with religion?

Rabbi I won't accept a religion that says it's the only right one.

David But you are a Rabbi in such a religion. The Jewish Scriptures present a God who revealed himself only to the Jews. This same God declared other religions an abomination and a lie, and he severely rebuked our fathers whenever they dabbled in them.

Rabbi I believe God revealed himself through all religions, which is shown by the fact that they all teach essentially the same thing.

David noticed his friends in the audience cringing.

David Is this why you don't obey the Christian faith, because it isn't universally known?

Rabbi God wouldn't do it that way.

David How did God actually do it with our ancestors? First, God revealed himself just to the Jews, and only later when the Messiah appeared did he begin to tell the rest of the world.

Rabbi I still maintain that the uneven distribution of Christianity makes one wonder about its truthfulness.

David My confidence in the truthfulness of Christianity is based on the convincing proofs God gave his messengers, from Abraham to the Apostles. It's also based on his power today, which I've already observed in his church, especially two days ago. The fact that some ethnic groups accepted Christianity more readily than others does nothing to nullify these proofs.

Rabbi Perhaps, but I don't believe Jesus is God's promised Messiah.

David I recently did a study on this and found an astounding number of similarities between Jesus and the God of the Old Testament. Do you mind if I read a sample?

Rabbi Be my guest.

David pulled a sheet of paper from his Bible. As he was about to begin, he noticed his cousin Joseph sitting in the front row. Joseph smiled and gave David a thumbs up. David also spotted Pam, one of his Vanberth students, sitting two rows behind Joseph. Last February, on the first day of the semester, she had asked him after class if there was anything in history that might prepare us for what comes after the grave.

David Like Adam, Jesus is the head of a new race, a race of immortals. Like Abel, he was murdered by his kinsman, though innocent. Like Noah, he delivers us from God's wrath. Like Abraham, God promises us a new country through him. Like Isaac, his birth was miraculous and he was offered as a sacrifice by his Father. Like Joseph, Jesus was disowned by his own people but exalted to second-in-command, and like Joseph he is the sole means of salvation for the very ones who rejected him. Like Moses, he was almost killed at birth, was rejected by the Jews, and returned as a savior with a new covenant. Like Aaron, he is a high priest who offered the sacrifice of atonement, himself. Like Gideon, God sent him to deliver Israel with only a handful of men. Like Samson, his birth was announced by an angel, and he had amazing powers. Like David, Jesus was chosen by God but hunted by the leaders of Israel, yet God ultimately made him King. Like Elijah, he predicted future judgment and called the nation back to God. Like Elisha, he had the Spirit of God, raised the dead, and healed Gentiles. Like Job, he was wrongly accused of wickedness by his companions, and God told those same

companions they would only be spared by Job's intercession. Psalm two speaks of him as God's Son, and Isaiah speaks of him as the son of David. Like Jeremiah, he was sent to warn Jerusalem, but only a few listened. Jesus gave the Holy Spirit, as Joel predicted, and he pronounced woes on Israel, like Amos. Like Jonah, he came out of the earth after three days to preach to the nations, and they listened. He was born in Bethlehem as Micah predicted, and he came humbly on a donkey as Zechariah prophesied. Finally, Malachi said he would be preceded by a messenger, John the Baptist.

Rabbi I admit the similarities, but where is the Messiah's rule of peace and righteousness across the whole Earth?

David It's already here and continually expanding. As we speak, Jesus' servants are carrying the knowledge of the God of Abraham to distant jungles and remote mountain valleys, something the Jews have never done. The Messiah's rule has been spreading for two thousand years. Go over there at six o'clock and hear testimonies of the peace and righteousness that Jesus the Messiah is bringing to people from all nations, precisely as the Hebrew prophets predicted.

Rabbi All that doesn't matter. I don't accept Jesus' claim to be divine.

David Neither did the Jewish Sanhedrin who voted to put Jesus to death. They didn't know his Father, so naturally when his Son showed up they didn't recognize him either.

Rabbi Our Scriptures say there is only one God.

David Genesis chapter two tells us how the first man and woman became one flesh. So how many were there, one or two? You stumble over mere words, you and the Muslims.

Rabbi To be honest, I don't put much stock in the Jewish Scriptures. They contain a lot of mistakes and are only the opinions of men.

David and the Rabbi sat down while Ezra stood up. "Good evening, ladies and gentleman. My name is Ezra Ruben, another Christian Jew. I will be reading a story which summarizes the discussions we've been hearing the past three weeks." Ezra unfolded a sheet of paper.

An airplane carrying several dozen people crashed high in the mountains. A few died, but most survived without injury. After waiting by the airplane for a week, they realized no one was coming to rescue them. Their provisions had run out in the first few days, so the decision was made to hike out as a group. The terrain was rugged and uninhabited, but they had no choice.

Their biggest need was finding a source of food soon, before they collapsed from hunger. After hiking for several days, they still had found no food or any sign of civilization and were getting desperately weak.

They were traveling along a ridge with a flat bottomed valley on their left, a couple hundred feet down a steep slope. Suddenly, a woman excitedly pointed into the valley, and they gathered to the brim to look down. Directly below them was a large orchard of fruit trees and many were bearing fruit. The trees were laid out in a grid pattern with a stone wall around them, which made it clear they had been planted by men, but there was no other sign of humans. It was obvious the orchard had been abandoned years ago.

Someone shouted, “This is our day of salvation! Let’s climb down and eat.”

However, a number of them raised objections. One of the men proposed that the objections be heard, and he asked each one to present their case.

The first one said, “Nearly half of those trees have rotten fruit. Lousy orchard.”

A blind woman protested, “You’re only saying it to make me feel better. I refuse to trust you.”

The next person was hostile. “I hate fruit, and I hate your kind who are always pushing it on us.”

Another ridiculed the orchard, “What fool would plant fruit trees way up here in the mountains? And look at the stupid way the stone wall is laid out.”

The man beside him added, “Most scholars believe there are multiple ways to interpret what we’re seeing down there.”

Another stated confidently, “Science has proven that fruit trees never grow at this altitude. That’s a mirage brought on by extreme hunger.”

A man lectured, “Hiking down that steep hill would be earning our deliverance. That effort would steal glory from God by denying our need for his grace. God will hand us the fruit.”

Another said, “Can we trust those who planted the orchard? Those could be poisonous fruit trees.”

One grumbled, “Some of these good people are refusing to eat and will die. I simply cannot accept that everyone won’t be saved.”

One man was unwilling to walk to the brim and look down. “How convenient that these miraculous events are always witnessed by others, and never by me.”

A woman said politely, “No thanks. That’s not my thing.”

Yet another said, “I see gaps in the stone wall and a pine tree planted where you’d expect a fruit tree. These errors prove this can’t be an orchard.”

A few had gathered around a tall, handsome individual. “Our charismatic leader says he alone will show us where the true orchard is, and then he will take an offering.”

Another answered, “The original fruit trees were probably healthy, but these are copies of copies, so of course they became corrupt.”

A woman complained, “Some perished in the plane crash, and three days ago a baby died. These evils prove that our good fortune has to be a hallucination.”

One said, “What about those five who split off from us two days ago? They won’t find this orchard. Is that fair? Why be so narrow minded and insist this is the only one?”

The next lamented, “There’s too many unanswered questions. Why did no one come to rescue us, and why is this orchard way up here in the mountains?”

Another argued, “See how many of us are refusing to eat? How could you possibly think most of us are deceived?”

The last one moaned, “Years ago, I had a horrible experience with a fruit tree.”

When all the challengers finished, they turned to a shabbily dressed figure on the edge of the group, an uneducated peasant whose plane ticket had been a gift. “What do you say?”

The peasant replied, “I see fruit hanging on fruit trees. Let’s go down and eat. Otherwise we will die.”

Ezra folded the sheet of paper and addressed the crowd. “This story used exaggeration to make its point, but these same objections were given on this stage over the last three weeks. They weren’t as obvious as in the story because people whitewash them to make them appear reasonable. The Christian faith is a gateway to eternity in paradise, yet people concoct myriads of excuses to refuse it. I was a skeptic for sixty years, a Jew who despised Christianity, until I came to my senses. Take my advice. Don’t wait that long. All I ask is that you take a humble and honest look at your objections. Millions of Christians are pointing at the tree of life. Lay aside your pride, walk up to it, eat, and live.”

Afterward, Anna came up by the stage and found David, who said, “Anna. I didn’t know you were here. When I was sitting on the stage, I kept scanning the crowd for you.”

She smiled. “I was way in the back. You did a real nice job tonight, David.”

“Thanks.”

After a few seconds of silence, Anna asked quietly, “Do you think you’ll give me a call sometime?”

David lightly took her hand. “I think about you all the time. It’s just that, the way things are now, I think it’s best that—”

Anna started to tear up. “I know, I know. I’m trying, but it’s hard. I’m not ready to stand up to people. I think about it, but I can’t.”

David squeezed her hand. “If I could do it for you, believe me I would, but it has to be your own choice. I’ll wait.”

“I’m too much of a chameleon. I can’t promise anything. Maybe you shouldn’t wait.” Anna quickly pulled her hand from David’s, turned around and rushed out of the park.

Just then, Ezra walked up. David told him, “You know Dad, after what just happened, I should be a blubbering mess. But I feel a peace inside, as if the Holy Spirit is putting a wall of protection around my heart.”

Ezra put his arm around his son.

David handed him the keys. “You take the car home. I’ll walk. I need time to decompress.”

David walked out of the park in the direction of his house. Going down the sidewalk, he spotted a stocky man with a red beard approaching from the opposite direction. As he got closer, David thought he knew him. As they were about to pass each other, David stopped and said, “Excuse me, but you look familiar.”

The man acted at first as if he didn’t recognize David, but then he said, “Oh right. You’re that guy who fell over the cliff on Cedar Ridge.”

David cried, “Of course. Now I remember you.”

The man said, “So tell me, what’s happened to you since then?”

A slight smile came over David’s face. “You got time for a cup of coffee?”

The man paused for a moment and replied, “Sure, why not?”

# CHAPTER 23

## One Year Later

As Paul rode a taxi from the airport, he gazed out the window and reacquainted himself with his hometown. He was returning from his twelve month mission trip in a remote part of the world, which had allowed very little contact with people back home. He was especially eager to find out what had happened with David, from whom he had heard nothing for the past year. The events beginning at David's house a year and a half earlier had been some of the most remarkable months of Paul's life.

Paul walked up to the familiar door and gently rapped on it. He had decided to surprise David. When David answered, he gladly welcomed Paul into the same living room where it all started. At David's insistence, Paul recounted his experience on the mission trip, but he soon changed the subject and asked, "David, what's happened with you in the past year?"

"It's gone well." David replied calmly.

"I mean, what has God been doing?"

"My life has kind of settled down. I've been busy at the college."

"So they never fired you?"

"No, thankfully. I've been putting in extra hours. It's a good job and I don't want to lose it."

Paul looked out the back window. "I see you took the marble pillars down."

"They were hard to mow around, and I didn't need them anymore."

"How is Pastor Jesse? Do you still get together with him once a week?"

"That's on hold. I have been able to spend more time on the racquetball court. My game's really improved. And look, my picture window is fixed. I did the work myself."

Paul glanced at the window. “You did a nice job. Do you still go to Jesse’s church?”

“Not lately.”

“Did you find a different one?”

“Not yet. I should show you what I did with the backyard. Since my grass got trampled to death last year, I put in a Japanese garden.”

Feeling anxious, Paul asked, “Have you been reading through the Bible a second time?”

“You’re asking a lot of questions.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve been away a whole year.”

“I understand,” David said. “Are you going back to your old job?”

“I’ve got to sort that out yet. What about the gang from last year? What’s everybody doing?”

“To be honest, I haven’t kept in touch. I’ve been kind of a hermit.”

Paul’s stomach tightened. “Are you doing any volunteer work?”

“Not really. Don’t worry. I still believe in God.”

David was not his usual talkative self, and he stood near the door, as if hoping Paul would leave soon.

Paul started to feel panic. “How is your dad doing?”

“Fine. He went back to New York last year.”

“Have you talked to him lately?”

“Not since last year.” After more silence, David said, “I bet you have a lot of things to do since you just got back in town. We’ll get together sometime. I’ll call you.” David drifted to the front door and slowly opened it. Paul walked out the door, mumbling, “Yeah, give me a call.”

David shut the door, leaving Paul to stare at the sidewalk. He started walking aimlessly down the street. *This is bad*, he thought. *This is real bad, not only for David, but for everyone watching him.* It was the very thing Paul had feared. Every sign of the new life was gone from David, except for his empty profession of faith. He had lost everything he’d gained.

Paul wandered across an empty field. The path turned down some stairs. He misjudged the last step and his foot jerked underneath him. The jerk of his leg caused him to wake up, and he sat up in bed. After a few seconds he realized he had been dreaming. “It was a dream,” he shouted. “Praise God in heaven above, it was a dream. No. It was a nightmare.”

Now Paul was really eager to visit David. Looking out the window, he saw the first red streaks of dawn. It was Saturday morning. He couldn’t go to David’s house this early. He ate breakfast and loitered for a while until he

couldn't stand to wait any longer. Since it was a pristine morning, he bicycled the few miles to David's house.

As Paul rode across town, he wondered why he had that dream. Was it to prepare him? He turned down David's street with the same anxiety he had felt in the dream. As he came to the house, he noticed that the picture window was still broken. Plywood and plastic sheets filled the large hole. *Maybe he doesn't live here anymore.* He knocked on the door.

The door cracked open and a stranger peered through the gap. His grungy shirt, weathered face, and scraggly hair gave him a skid row appearance. With a three pack a day voice to match, he grunted, "What do you want?"

"Hi! I'm looking for David. Does he still live here?"

"Yup, but I think he's sleeping."

"Do you know when he'll get up?"

"Don't know."

After a pause, Paul said, "Maybe I can come back in an hour."

"What'd you say your name was?"

"Paul."

He opened the door wider. "Come on in. My name's Louie."

Paul tiptoed into the familiar living room. Peeking out the back window, he saw that the marble pillars were still there."

Louie shouted, "Hey Dave, there's a guy named Paul here to see you."

Paul cut in. "Please, you don't have to wake him now."

From the back of the house a voice called. "Did you say Paul?"

Louie answered, "Yeah, Paul. Isn't that what you said your name was?"

David bounded into the living room, wearing a bathrobe over his pajamas and a huge smile. "Paul!" David gave him a bear hug, lifted him off the ground, and spun him around 360 degrees. "You're back. Have you met my new friend Louie?"

Paul was a bit stunned. "Yes."

David said excitedly, "We met yesterday afternoon in the park by downtown. I invited him to the Bible study I host at my house, and since he didn't have a place to sleep, I let him stay here last night. Louie, I owe this man my life. Last year, he came here three evenings a week just to tell me about Jesus."

"You have a Bible study here?" Paul stammered.

"It starts in a half hour. I hope you can stay for it. Otherwise, there's one on Wednesday and Friday nights."

"You're hosting three Bible studies a week?"

David put his hand on Paul's shoulder. "I can't wait to tell you what God has done in the last year. He brings all these seekers my way. It's been so busy I haven't had time to get my picture window fixed, but who cares about that. I've seen people delivered from addictions, bitterness, and the occult. One guy was healed of stuttering."

The usually reserved Paul lost control and started crying. He fell to his knees, raised his hands and face to heaven and said, "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus." Louie looked at David and said, "You guys are different. Say, where do you keep the oatmeal?"

After David got Louie started on breakfast, he rejoined Paul in the living room. Paul said, "I hope you don't mind me getting carried away. I had a dream."

David beamed at Paul and said, "It is so good to see you. I've got to tell you all about the whole gang, Karl, Liz, Jose—" David looked up at the ceiling with a big smile and said, "Oh wow. You don't know about him."

"Know what?"

"There's a fellow who was part of the covenant. When I tell you what he's doing now, you are going to faint and fall flat on your back."

Paul cried, "Who is it?"

"There are fifteen people coming here in twenty minutes, and I still need to get ready. I want to tell you the whole story from the beginning. Can you stay for the study, and I'll tell you afterward?"

"You couldn't drag me out of here with a team of wild horses!"

"Great! I've been thinking the old gang should get together for a reunion. We can do it in my backyard, just like old times."

"David, what happened to your job at Vanberth?"

"They fired me. Big deal. I've got eternal life, and even better I'm a child of the living God. Right, Louie?"

Louie said from the kitchen, "Whatever you say, Dave. What did they fire you for?"

"Seeking God."

"Did you sue 'em?" Louie asked.

David explained, "At first I was thinking about it, but my dad set me straight. Christians don't demand our rights. We follow our Master's teaching."

"What's that?" Louie asked.

"Turn the other cheek," Paul answered. "So David, what are you doing for work now?"

“I work part-time for Pastor Jesse. The rest of my time I go wherever the Holy Spirit sends me.”

“One more question and then I’ll let you get ready. How’s your dad doing?”

“Ask him yourself. I hear him coming up the stairs right now.”

David left as Ezra entered the room. “Paul! What a delightful surprise.”

“Good morning, Mr. Ruben. Are you visiting?”

“No, I live here. I moved from New York six months ago. The Midwest suits me just fine. And I’m getting ready for a special event coming up soon.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ll find out.” As they visited, Paul told Ezra about his dream. Ezra said, “That is a scary dream. I’m glad there’s no truth to it.”

Paul agreed. “It made this morning ten times sweeter.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Paul, because last year I was remiss in not personally thanking you for everything you did for David. I can’t think of a greater gift you could give a man than to lead his child to the Lord Jesus Christ.”

David returned to the living room and glimpsed into the front yard. He looked at Ezra with a mischievous grin and said, “Say, Paul, someone’s coming up the front walk. Would you mind opening the door for my . . . fiancée?”

Paul was stunned. He rushed to look out the window, but David put out his arms to stop him. Just then there was a knock at the door.

David said, “Paul, you’re keeping my fiancée waiting.” Paul looked back and forth at David and Ezra, who were enjoying this. He headed toward the door. *Who is it? How will I react?* With a wobbly hand Paul opened the door. David and Ezra stood on either side of him, watching his reaction.

When the woman on the porch saw who opened the door, she exclaimed with glee, “Paul!” In an instant, the astonished Paul realized all that this meant. With a quivering voice he said, “Anna? Anna!” Anna gave Paul a hug, while David and Ezra exchanged a high five.

As the four of them moved to the living room, David, Ezra, and Anna were beaming from ear to ear, but Paul had tears of joy. Ezra said, “I wish I had gotten that on camera.”

Louie, who had witnessed the whole scene from the kitchen door, said with a deadpan voice, “Hey, Dave, I only got one question. Are all your Bible studies like this?”

After Paul had calmed down, he asked Anna, “So tell me what happened?”

She began, “Remember that story in the park about the woman called Beloved, where she dreams that the Prince proposes, and she turns him down?”

Paul nodded. “People do strange things in dreams.”

Anna continued, “Six months ago I woke up and realized, that’s me. I knew I needed to grow something.”

“What?”

Anna pointed to her backbone. “This!”

David added, “And the rest is history, a beautiful history.”

Paul asked, “What gave you the courage to get over the hump?”

Anna smiled and looked at David. “I really wanted to be with him.”

David added, “I was just the carrot. She got much more than that.”

Anna put her arm around David. “That Beloved story has a double meaning for me. Now I’ve got two princes.”

“So you two are getting married? When?”

David told him, “Next month. We both want you to be in the wedding. Would you do us the honor?” Paul was so choked up that all he could do was nod his head up and down.

People started arriving for the Bible study. David leaned over to Paul and said, “This study is good, but my favorite one is Friday night for Jewish seekers. My dad dazzles them with his knowledge of Jewish culture. They even come from neighboring towns. God is blessing it.”

“The Bible does say the gospel is for the Jew first.”

David responded, “Didn’t a guy named Paul write that?”

“So what else is God calling you to, David?”

“Last year was a remarkable experience. I was thinking I’d write a book about it.”

Paul grinned. “I’ve got a good idea for a title.”

## Some Years Later

David walked into an Ashbow nursing home. He went straight through the lobby and entered room number twenty-four. He quietly sat down on a chair next to the bed. A very weak Ezra cracked open his eyes. When he saw his son next to him, his strength revived and he sat up in bed.

“Good afternoon, Father. How was lunch?”

“Fine, what I could eat of it.”

“I’m sorry Anna and the kids couldn’t come. I’ll bring them next time.”

“Just as well. I want to talk to you privately. I don’t have many days left.”

David listened with a pained expression on his face. Ezra went on, “Don’t feel bad for me. I’m going to a much better place. I know my Savior lives, and he has promised to receive me on the other side of death’s door. Am I right?”

“Father, everything I’ve seen and heard since my conversion has only strengthened my convictions. I am far more certain of the truths of biblical Christianity than I was on the day of my baptism. I know firsthand your faithfulness to Jesus and his gospel, so I have no doubt that you will receive a rich welcome into his eternal kingdom.”

Ezra smiled. “I knew that, but it’s comforting to hear it from your lips. Come closer.” David slid his chair next to the bed. Ezra raised a quivering hand and laid it on David’s knee. “David Ezra Ruben, listen to me very carefully. When our Lord returns to this Earth on the great day, all believers, living and dead, will be gathered together to be with him forever. Now I solemnly charge you, my son, that you do everything in your power to remain faithful to the God of Jacob until the end, so that we will be reunited on that day. Look me in the eye and promise.”

“I promise, with all my heart.”

Ezra continued, “Each person must make his or her own choice, but I also charge you to do all that you can to keep your wife and my grandchildren in the faith.”

“I promise.”

“When you are tempted with sin, when you are discouraged, weary, or angry, when the journey turns bitter, remember your father. Don’t give up. Don’t turn off the path. Finish the race. Your earthly father loves you and will be waiting to embrace you at the finish line, but know that this is also true of your heavenly Father a thousand times more.”

Ezra took his hand off David’s knee. “Did you bring the book as I asked?”

“Yes, I brought it.”

“Read me the last story, one more time.”

David opened the book, Search for Eternal Life, and remarked, “After all this time, I still don’t know who wrote this.”

As Ezra was about to speak, he grimaced and put his hand on his chest.

David jumped to his feet. “Are you okay? Should I call the nurse?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” After Ezra recovered, he said, “Perhaps when I get to the other side I will meet the author.”

“If you do, tell them this book changed my life.”

Ezra corrected David, “The author will say they were only one of many tools in the Master’s hand, and this book points to that Master, the Savior. He is the one who changes lives.”



## Reward

A man named Christian was hiking up a high mountain pass and was almost at the top. He was one of the saints, which means holy ones. Many years ago, he left the land of his birth and set out on a path toward the other side of the mountains. He had done this because he knew that the depraved world on this side was passing away, but the world on the other side would endure forever. There were many temptations and difficulties along the journey, but the call of the gospel, the help of the Holy Spirit, and the encouragement of the saints kept him climbing upward. His aged body was worn out, but his hope had grown stronger year by year.

At last, the day came. It was late autumn. The sky was overcast, and the wind was raw. A light drizzle soaked his clothes. At dusk he wearily plodded along the trail, ascending a narrow valley. He turned a corner and encountered something he had never seen before. An enormous gate filled the gorge. Impassable cliffs on either side rose into the clouds. He had to pass through the gate.

As Christian drew near the gate, he observed that it was built of very ancient stones, and its massive door was constructed of rust covered iron. Christian knocked on the door, and it opened by itself with loud creaking. Inside was a tunnel, shrouded in complete darkness. Christian hesitated. Then he noticed an inscription above the door which read, “Those who are victorious will inherit all this.” With a mix of anxiety and confidence, he stepped into the darkness, and the colossal door shut behind him.

He was in total darkness for a brief time, and then another door opened in front of him, at the other end of the tunnel. Light flooded in and he shielded his eyes. Christian stepped out of the tunnel and began walking down the path, his eyes gradually adjusting. The wind, rain and clouds were

gone. The sky was bright and beautiful. The season had turned to springtime and the time of day to mid-morning. His clothes were no longer wet, and he noticed a spring in his step that had left him decades ago. The air was pure and fresh, with a pleasing fragrance.

As he continued walking, he became increasingly aware of the beauty around him and the exquisite sounds coming from the woods, as if they were singing. Even the path was devoid of anything that could harm or soil his feet. Strength, joy and peace welled up inside him, such as he had not felt for a long time, and some of which he had never felt. The path brought him out of a grove of trees and into the open. He came to the edge of a ridge which afforded an unbroken panorama of the entire country below him.

Words do not exist on our side of the mountains that do justice to what Christian beheld. In every direction stretched a new world such as he had never dreamed of. The most spectacular vistas he had ever witnessed in the old world could not compare with the splendor of this place. But it also had something entirely new—righteousness. He could feel down to his bones that everything he saw was utterly untainted, devoid of even the slightest trace of corruption. Nearby, Christian spotted a bench under the shade of a giant oak, and he sat down on it.

After a few minutes, a man in a bright white robe appeared in the distance, walking toward him along the side of the ridge. Christian stood to his feet. When the man arrived at the bench, he looked directly at Christian and announced, “Welcome, Christian, to the kingdom of your God and my God. You have come through the gates of death. I am a messenger, sent to tell you about this place, which you have been yearning for all these years. Previously, you knew it only by the promises of God, but now you can see and touch it.”

Christian asked, “Can any of the pains and evils from the other side of the mountains ever leak over to this place?”

“Never!” assured the messenger. “By an unchanging decree of our King, all who do what is vile, and the curses which are their due wages, are forever barred from here.”

“What is to become of the land I just left?”

“God has decreed that the kingdom of his enemy will one day be destroyed. Then this magnificent land will fill the entire Earth.”

“When will this be?”

“No one knows except the Father. However, it is not far off. On that great day the Son of God will lead the armies of heaven over the pass to annihilate his foes and bring together the children of God from around the world. Then we will all live together in the city of God, the New Jerusalem.”

“Is that the same city I see below us?”

“Yes. But at the consummation of all things, that city below will transform into a jewel even more brilliant, filling the whole world. Just as the earthly city of Jerusalem was once the center of God’s kingdom on Earth and the gathering place of his people, so will it be with the new Jerusalem, as the Hebrew prophets foretold.”

Christian asked, “What will life be like in this place?”

“For us who love him, God has prepared a feast. Your youth will be renewed, and you will be given a crown with all the honor, riches, authority and duties that come with it. This is a place of safety, peace, and prosperity, where no one will ever harm you. Hate is no more. It is replaced with saints and angels in harmonious and joyful assembly.”

“What is to be my purpose here?”

“The ways of the kingdom of God are the same on either side of the grave, so you will still love, serve and worship your God.”

“Does everyone here know the Lord?”

“Yes!” shouted the messenger with delight. “In a short time I will escort you to the city below, where you will be reunited with the believers you once knew on Earth, who came here before you. But here is perhaps the most glorious facet of this new life. All the good things I am describing—they continue without end.”

Christian was overwhelmed. “Death was the black shroud that darkened every corner of the land I was born into.”

“Here you will have no fear of sickness and no concern that a loved one will die. No enemy nation will invade, and no madman will go on a rampage, for the Christ will rule with a rod of iron.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“The King promised with a holy vow, ratified by the blood of his Son, which was shed on the other side of the mountains. The moment these promises left his mouth, they became set in granite forever, for our God never lies.”

Christian recalled, “These are the promises he spoke through his prophets and apostles on the other side of the pass.”

“Yes,” said the messenger, “and which he also spoke through his Son.”

Christian inquired, “You have told me about this place, but tell me about our God since all these wonders come from him.”

The messenger proclaimed, “You already know him, having experienced his divine nature as you climbed to the mountain pass. As you correctly observed, all the benefits of this world spring from him alone. Here he will lavish his mercy upon us for all time. But there is a tremendous blessing here that your previous life lacked.”

“What is that?”

“In this world God lives among his people, and we will behold his face.”

Christian agreed, “To live in the presence of God is a reward that could never be outdone.”

“You are right, for no one loves you like he does. He will never grow old, never be overthrown, and never resign in disgrace. And he will never send you away, for his loving kindness is everlasting.”

Christian lamented, “How utterly insane to miss all this in exchange for a few years of illicit pleasure. Oh, that some could hear my voice and seize the chance to come to this place, before the door closes for the last time.”

The messenger began to walk. “Let us not delay any longer, for today you will enter into your reward. Know this, Christian, that the heart of your reward is not this place. Your reward is the living God. Come. We shall descend this hill, and I will bring you to meet your God face to face. There at his side, you and all the citizens of his new creation will enjoy him, forever and ever.”



David closed the back cover of the book. Ezra drifted off to sleep with a smile on his face. David quietly stood up and walked out of the room, taking the book with him.

## One Day in the Future

It was a sunny morning in Ashbow. A fifteen year old boy bounced out the front door of his parents’ house, whistling his favorite song. He was headed toward a friend’s house in another part of town. For a shortcut, he walked through a cemetery, which was filled with Ashbow’s departed. This lad never considered that they would not remain in their graves.

The cemetery contained all types of people, those who had done good and those who had done evil. Some had defied God openly, while others carelessly stayed in false religions. There were also those who had been part of a church but denied God by their actions. Among them are hypocrites, deserters and the unrepentant, as well as adulterers and idolaters who mixed Christianity with other loves. These all professed faith and assumed their destiny was a good one, but they had not been careful to do the will of God because they did not fear him. Mixed among these graves were the bodies of those who had truly loved the Lord. They obeyed Christ until the end, and lived their lives in expectation of the great day. The thoughts, words, and deeds of everyone in the cemetery, the righteous and the wicked, were recorded in heaven in full detail.

Exiting the cemetery, the boy passed through Ashbow's downtown, which was teeming with activity. Business was good, and expansion plans were being drawn up. Others were buying homes, expecting to live in them for years to come. He passed a young couple entering a store to go shopping. They were planning on getting married next month. Retirees were enjoying a leisurely breakfast with friends, discussing the latest topics of the day.

Most of them rarely gave thought to their Maker and what he required of them. They were too consumed with the cares and pleasures of life. Perhaps when things settled down they would fit God into their schedule. They never considered that one day the opportunity to get ready for eternity would come to an abrupt end.

On the far side of downtown, the lad passed a church which his family had attended on and off. His family believed church was a good thing, yet they didn't take seriously what the Christian faith taught. No one in this boy's home honestly expected that Christians alone would inherit the Earth on the day of Jesus' appearing. They didn't prepare for that day, even though it is stated plainly in the book upon which their church is founded.

On that day, the entire world will witness Jesus coming to punish the wicked and to gather those who love him to their eternal reward. The boy and his family were not anticipating this, even though they are warned of this in the book which they profess to believe. Inexplicably, they made little or no effort to get ready for Jesus' arrival by separating themselves from this evil and corrupt world.

The boy arrived at his friend's house, where they intended to have fun all day. They were eager to try out their recently purchased gadgets and enjoy the latest in music, movies, and games. After an hour of being engrossed in entertainment, they suddenly heard a loud and dreadful trumpet blast coming from high in the sky. They ran to the window and saw that everything was bathed in a strange light. Gripped with panic, the boy and his friend scrambled out the front door. As they did this, both the earth below and the heavens above began to shake. This threw them to the ground in the front yard. The lads got to their knees and turned their faces heavenward. One of them thrust his arm up, pointing to the clouds. With an expression of terror, he shrieked, "Look!!!"