

**Search
for
Eternal
Life**

CHAPTER 1

The alarm started beeping. 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 of his bedroom window and saw that the snow had stopped falling. It looked like half a foot. Peering toward the street, he noticed that it had already been plowed, which was a relief. He could handle his unplowed driveway 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, and if he was lucky, the sun would come out and get the job started.

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 exactly how long it would take him to drive to campus. Turning off the radio, he went to rinse his bowl in the sink. When he turned the faucet off, David noticed how eerily quiet his place was, especially with the new snow muffling sounds from the outside. The loneliness of living by himself had started weighing on him lately, and he had been thinking it would be good to have some people over.

David got into his car and shivered as his body hit the cold seat. He started the engine and accelerated toward the foot-high snow bank at the bottom of his driveway. Blasting through that hurdle, 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, it seemed the perfect time for David to think about warmer weather. Maybe he would take some time off in the summer to go on that adventurous odyssey he'd always dreamed about. 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 classes, laden with heavy winter coats and backpacks. Like them, he felt a little bit of excitement, but also a little 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 start.

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 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 very 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 very broadly," David prodded.

A voice in the back answered, "To learn the truth."

"Who said that?"

A young man put up his hand. "I did."

"That's it!" David said. "My fellow teachers might disagree with me, but I maintain that all other subjects—science, business, the arts—are based on history. Because 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 and said, "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 truths from the past that can improve our future."

Another young woman asked, "Isn't that depending too much on other people, a lot of whom are dead?"

David replied, "All our knowledge of history is based on trusting others, and so is virtually all the information that you have in that brain of yours. If we can't rely on each other for knowledge, we might as well shut down the whole college." David glanced at his wristwatch. "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 tiny, barely one hundred pounds.

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

"Mr. Rubin, would you mind too much 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 for that one we wouldn't look back too many years, but I think you got the gist of it. 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. You know, there has 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 hoping that in your studies you might have sifted out the relevant parts, 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. "Look at the time. I'm sorry, but I have to run. Keep asking those good questions." David hurried out the door 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 the 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 nice job teaching history at a prestigious 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 any hurry for that."

Michael consoled his friend. "Have patience. He's still a young man."

"But what about me?" Ezra protested. "I'm only a few years from eighty."

"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 slight 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 had been hired a few years earlier, she took it upon herself to mentor him.

"Evelyn, I don't often see you in here relaxing," 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 cut my knees from under 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 teaching gift, and your passion is contagious."

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

"Age will mellow you out."

"I'm not getting any younger," David said. "My dad likes to remind me of that."

"I've never asked you 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 friends and 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 a little 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 closest 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, empty lot on one side, on the edge of town. 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 watching a ball game?"

"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 creaky old book?"

"Careful, it might fall apart. I got that in Europe too. Check out the title."

Karl blew the dust off. "Let's see, what does it say? *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 past 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. We'd

hide clues and see who could follow their trail to the prize. Searching for lost treasure always fascinated me. I had to buy it."

"I suppose if you were ranking searches, this would 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 the 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 I get nervous. I like my life now, and I'm not sure where that book might take me."

Karl sneered. "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 the bliss of 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 a half 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 had a spectacular 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 35,000 Midwesterners, few enough to feel 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 settled 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 the edge of a seventy-foot cliff. A fallen tree blocked the path, so he detoured between the tree and the cliff's edge. Slipping around the tree trunk, 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 as loudly as he could.

Glancing behind, he saw the town. How bizarre. Here he was teetering on the verge of death while Ashbow watched in silence, serene and ignorant. He wondered how this had happened. 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.

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 wouldn't change it. 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 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 safe yet.* Slowly and methodically, David inched upward, making absolutely sure of

his 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.

In a few minutes a stocky man with a red beard raced up the trail. Seeing David lying face down, he turned him over. "Are you okay? I heard someone screaming for help, so I got up here as fast as I could."

David came to life and jumped to his knees. "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 now."

"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." David got to his feet and staggered down the trail, keeping far away from the cliff.

The other fellow walked along-side. 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 was smeared with dirt and blood. "Who are you, my guardian angel?"

"No, I drive a semi. I'm just trying to cheer you up. Sorry, I'm not much of a psychiatrist."

They reached the bottom and David said, "I'm sorry I lost it. Thanks for hiking all the way up there. Can I give you a lift?"

"My car's around the corner. 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 a 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* helped David recover, at least on the surface. 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 some 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, sir." 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 before. He sat down on the couch and laid it on his lap. Nervously turning the first pages, he found no table of contents, just a short story entitled "Will to Live." He began to read it.



Will to Live

Many years ago two nations were at war with each other. A young man felt the call to serve his country. It was not an easy decision to leave his farm,

for he had a 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. This was a greater deterrent against escape than the prison fence, for the prisoners were too weak and discouraged 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 flee."

"I might be caught and executed. It's a long way to the border, and I am very weak. 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 still 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 was too much work and would certainly be unsuccessful. He was so beaten down. Wouldn't it be easier to let go of life and drift off into the appealing darkness of death? He remembered his family 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 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 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 weeks of traveling, he came within sight of the border, the last barrier. All that 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. Crossing the city limits, he passed Cedar Ridge. He drove for an hour to a small town and checked into a motel. The woods and fields in the 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 was on the slushy trails to distract him.

Maybe I'm overreacting, he thought. I don't have terminal cancer. 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 not. So there is some reason to think there may be life after death. I should at least check it out. Let me review. Like the prisoner, if I stay here I will certainly die. There is a chance of escape. How good a chance I don't know. Therefore, I should try.

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

Wait a minute. I'm only five minutes from my car! I expected to be wrestling with this for hours. I must be missing something. I better go over this again. One: I know for sure I will age and die, whether in forty days or forty years. Two: A solution might exist. I can't be sure it doesn't. Three: Therefore, I should search for it, unless I prefer death.

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 headache. 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. 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 fifteen minutes his pad was still blank. So he wrote down every crazy idea that came into his head, no matter how absurd. After filling three pages, he began crossing off the ones that were obviously bad ideas. After an hour he was stuck at five options. His high school teacher had once said that a group working together is always smarter than one person. That had always rung true for David.

He crossed four items off his 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 figured he could work out those details 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 to me. 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 building entire universities dedicated solely to searching 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 popped 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. This was real, and 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 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 watched the snow melt in the front yard for a couple minutes. Then he turned to David with a smile. "I've thought enough. I'm in."

"Really?"

"I'm in. I'll be there."

"Fantastic! Do you think we'll get anyone else?" David asked.

"Yes I do, and you're the reason 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. 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. Sort of like a treasure map, one step at a time."

"David, did you notice something unusual about the book?"

"No."

"There's no author."

David quickly grabbed the book and looked at the pages before the first story. He found no author listed, just like on the outside of the book. "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 a little riled up. They might not be too happy with what we're doing."

"You can't be serious. All we're doing is trying to stay alive. Why would any sane person be offended with that?"

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, hoping they would all be needed. They hustled to staple posters on telephone poles all over town. They paid for an advertisement on the back page of the town newspaper. Here is what it said:

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 graduate 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 had been a little too cute.

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 bathrooms were. The meetings were expected to last one to two hours, depending on the topic. 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. There are a lot of other things you could be doing this evening. In a minute you'll each have a chance to tell us why you came. First I will share my one ground rule. We are all at different places in our beliefs about eternal life. Therefore, I'm asking everyone to temporarily lay aside your beliefs and start as if with a clean slate. I'm not asking you to renounce your beliefs, but only to keep them to yourselves for now. If your beliefs are correct, I trust we will gravitate in their 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. I know 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 see her one day. I thought, what was that? 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 also can relate to what you said, Barb. People pull in the hope of heaven only when they feel bad, and then forget about it. I'd be surprised if it really works that way. 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, but only

reading books. When I saw the ad for this group, I figured maybe this will help. I am very determined and I hope everyone else takes this seriously. If there is any hope of life after death, I don't want to miss it. I'm not here just for myself, but for my wife and little ones. They're making a big sacrifice with me being here three evenings a week, but it's worth it. I don't care what we have to do. I want the truth."

David thought, *I really 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 everyone returning. "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.

If you don't quit, you are released from the covenant when either:

1. You decide you have found eternal life.
2. You decide you will not find eternal life.
3. These meetings disband for any reason.

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 to join. So far, I'm the only member. I want everyone to think about this until Friday at least. 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. It's not like you're getting married."

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 to 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 reason for why you would miss work. In other words, it can't be that you're just busy.

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

Paul I'm impressed too. But I hope you understand that 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 read the story of the young soldier who escaped from prison, the one entitled "Will to Live."

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 would bypass important steps and jeopardize our search.

Barb Okay, am I the only one who thinks this is getting just 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 Jeremiah Ruben, read this book." He also told me not to peek ahead.

Barb Maybe he just meant, here's a good read.

David It was the way he said it. Only one other time in my entire life did he address me with all three names like that: my bar mitzvah, twenty-three years ago, next week. 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 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 character who can lead you to it.

The following evening, Sandra talked with her husband over supper. "I've been thinking all day 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?" said her husband. "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 very busy at work right now. I also need to schedule my ankle operation. And then several 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, 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 stages 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 a tangible reminder representing the steps in our search, something we can see and touch. I've already laid a stone for the story we read last time, "Will to Live." We didn't discuss the story, but your being here shows you agree with its premise. I imagine in some cases, the covenant

members will vote on placing a stone. 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 lot 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 virgin 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 lands.

In spite of this prohibition, one day a small band set out to explore far off lands. After traveling many weeks, they discovered a fertile valley in the mountains. 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 elected to send messengers back to tell their tribe about this place of safety. Three hearty 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 moving 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 and insects in the forest are common throughout the world, a fact that has been known since ancient times."

"We have 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 speak from the tribal wisdom that has been passed down to us, and we have no reason to doubt it."

One of the young men said, "When our band originally 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. We must accept this world as it is, the good with the bad."

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

As the young men left the village, 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 Maybe they didn't want to admit that the young men's group was right.

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, sure we are right.

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 truth is beyond dispute. Pride quickly arrives at a conclusion with insufficient evidence, and then never questions itself because it's enamored with its own cleverness.

Sandra That's why they call it being wise in your own eyes. 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 out on 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.

Barb As I was driving here tonight, I was followed by a flying saucer.

Mary My initial reaction was that this could not have happened, 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 Maybe it was a Frisbee.

David Thanks, Barb. This has been excellent. Let's remember these tribal elders and avoid their unteachable 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 store parking lot, 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 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."

"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 stormed 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 remembered he hadn't even gone into the store, so he swung the car around.

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 eternal life 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. My folks gave us kids a good home. 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 admits you don't have the answer. But then I thought, 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 a 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, but in the small town of Woodhill 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 all night, 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 sacrifice? Maybe that won't be needed.

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

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

Mary Our vices, our comforts.

Jose Our nation, our culture, 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's 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; should I hold onto my convictions?

David What are you suggesting?

Paul Murder we all agree on, but I'm suggesting we have some humility toward our convictions on the less cut-and-dried matters. 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 I think we learned in the last meeting to admit that maybe I'm the one who's wrong.

Jose Go Mary!

Anna We're talking about commitment. Some people, and I might be one of them, think too much commitment leads to fanaticism.

Cooper You mean it could make someone a suicide bomber.

Anna Something like that. Some have committed atrocities in the name of their religion. They were very committed.

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 being a decent person, all at the same time.

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.

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 with. Then make up your mind that you will sacrifice them if needed.

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

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 three 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, and the stones were stacked one on top of the other.

Wednesday

Each meeting, David brought out the book and handed it to someone to read from. 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. A few 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 enormous.

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 apply at the embassy on a certain day, three months hence. Tua was elated and made plans to travel to the capital. 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 kind and 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."

Her friend agreed. "Yes, you are probably right. Life has not been easy for you since your husband passed away, and you deserve mercy. Certainly they will understand that."

With growing expectation, Tua wrote her cousins to prepare for her coming. One of them wrote back and suggested that she contact the embassy

to verify the exact nature of the program. Tua thought, *I don't need to bother with that. I know how these things work.* Besides, she had overheard the 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 our language to work with immigrants in America. No knowledge of English is required to begin with, but you must have gone through the two-week training program. We have been conducting them throughout the country over the past several 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 the training 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 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 You bet. I did tear up, but it wasn't for that woman. It was for everyone heading into eternity with her presumption. They're 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. I'm not saying this to criticize, but to warn us so we don't make the same mistake.

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 ten descriptions of God. What does that tell you about our 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 else 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 he, or she, exists.

David Right, Barb, and I'm one of them. As for the story, let me try to summarize in two words. 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 to say is, it could be, and I expect we will find out if it is. Hopefully, it's not.

David Good one, Anna.

David made a stone with the word "Assumptions" and laid it on the other two.

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 to use, 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. Maybe it's a premonition, but I don't think 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. Oh, man. 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." An 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 here to find the truth."

Sandra gave Mary a tearful hug.



Finding Truth

A huge explosion rocked an underground mine. Two dozen 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 water may run out. If we are to get out alive, we must find a way of escape 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 tunnel will impress itself upon my consciousness."

The foreman found another man heading up a known dead-end tunnel. "Why do you think that is 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 cultural and historical environment in which it was created."

Moving on, he found an idle man, so he said, "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 could you know that?"

"Because I don't think it can be found. 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 popular 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.

The exasperated foreman moved on to discover four men playing cards. "What are your stories?"

The first said, "Since I can't see an escape tunnel, it doesn't exist. I don't believe in anything I can't see."

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

The third said, "I deeply long for us to be rescued. My longing will make it happen."

The fourth 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 foreman was about to pull out his hair when he spotted lights coming down a tunnel. A rescue party approached, led by one of the miners who had been trapped with them. The foreman ran to embrace the man and ask 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 tracks, but when I got there, a rescue team was already descending. So I led them on the route I had taken, all the way 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 never 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. Spiritual things would be: God, religious truths, the creation and end of the world,

angels, demons, our soul, morality. In other words, all that invisible stuff outside of nature.

- Anna Paul, are you saying people actually approach spiritual topics with the same nonsense as those miners?
- Cooper He's absolutely right. As I listened to the story, I thought it sounded like a lot of religious talk I've heard.
- Sandra I agree. But it's often phrased in such a way as to actually sound reasonable.
- Jose Why would people do that?
- Owen I've seen that too, but others 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 For some reason mankind is prone to fall into these miner's bizarre methods. It's a warning.
- Liz Now I'm starting to see it. 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."

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

David kicked a chair. "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 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 my fill of those for this year."

"This gives you a lot 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 times 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. Don't worry, I'll be okay."

"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 are headed? I've got to get these questions answered. I've put it off way 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 to his first meeting.

Before they started, Elliot asked, "I've been told you are using this relic of a book like a treasure map, and no one has read it or looked ahead, 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 you know what? We like the book, and I think you will to. It keeps us coming back to see where it's going."

Elliot persisted. "How do you know someone hasn't found another copy?"

Karl said, "Believe me, they haven't. I've tried."

David glared at Karl.

"I was only checking to make sure no one else could find one," Karl said.



Deception

A band of pioneers left home to settle in a new land. They traveled many months to a sparsely populated territory. This region had unique soil and the only crop that would grow was a particular 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 the presence of these pioneers, so they deliberately deceived some into planting the wrong crop. A few did plant the local wheat, but most of the pioneers planted various 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 and became greatly disturbed. He called the pioneers together and explained their dilemma. "You have been deceived by your friends back home, by your own mishandled tests and by the 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, sneered at 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 implying they are mistaken. Each one has chosen the crop he preferred, and who are we 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 were deceived.

Barb I suppose someone is going to say that this describes our spiritual beliefs and everyone is walking around 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 What if you walked around your place of employment and asked people what they believe? You would find that one person is an atheist and another is a theist. One believes he is going to heaven, and another believes in reincarnation. One thinks God is personal, and another thinks God is an impersonal force. One regards only his religion as correct, while another believes they all are. By the simple laws of logic, some of them have to be deceived. Yet most of them are as unconcerned over this as the pioneers were for their crops. They would rather be like that last pioneer who wanted to believe everyone was right.

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 rest 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 all know the common ways to do that. The moral of the story is that we are most susceptible to deception when we deny its existence. 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 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 what'll happen because I know human nature. I was a salesman. Some of you will drive home tonight thinking that 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 might be wrong. I'm here to find out if I am or not.
- David placed the word "Deception" on a marble stone and placed 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. Just what I need, a distraction. I hope she doesn't sit by me.*



Trust

In the days when North America still belonged to the Indians, two voyagers 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? He told us what he knew, and it matches 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. We are cornered. We must move ahead with the facts we have, even if it isn't as much information as we would like."

The next day, Rene came to Pierre and said, "There is no reason to think that you, the Indians, or the Trapper means us harm. We have directions, so 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 Think about it. 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 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, and 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 would use for any important decision. Remember, 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. We can't do it all ourselves.

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

Mary Look at the positive side. 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, so you'd better have someone you trust on the other side to catch you, 'cause you're not in charge of your life anymore. You're dead.

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

Hank Oh, don't act so surprised.

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?"

"Yes," Paul said, "it's going better than I expected, but you never know what's going to happen. Things aren't always as they appear."

"What do you mean?"

"Some that are far away may reach the goal. Others appear to be there already, but are not."

Friday



Searching

Two women worked very late one evening, deep inside an enormous office building. Suddenly, they heard an explosion somewhere in the building. Flames spread rapidly in every direction. The women were from out of town and totally unfamiliar with the building. When they had been led to the office earlier in the day, they had paid no attention to how they got there. The old place had no fire escape signs. To make matters worse, the hallways and rooms twisted all over, making the exit difficult to locate. No one else was in the building, and the smell of smoke grew stronger.

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

Tessa replied, "That won't be easy. Did you notice when we came in how the hallways snaked this way and that?"

"Yes I did, and the entrance looked like the rest of the doors. We'd better start searching for an exit before we run out of time, but we must stick together."

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

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

"Okay, but I don't know how much to search inside of 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 one 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 thousands of religions, ideologies, and gurus. I got totally depressed because I couldn't study them in a hundred lifetimes. I was afraid we'd never find the answer.

Geoff Don't try to study them all. Look at them just enough to know if we should dive in deeper or move on.

Elliot Come on, Geoff. Those were rooms you could size up in a glance. I'm not sure we can do that with an entire religion or whatever we'll be looking at.

Cooper I got a feeling we'll find out soon.

Paul This story warns us that we can't afford to get bogged down in the details of every path and religion. There simply isn't enough time. But I know people who do that very thing, and they don't care that it doesn't lead to life. They are enjoying themselves studying every book in the room, while the flames engulf them.

Hank You don't have to 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 and Tessa by the spiral staircase? 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 have avoided this subject all my life, so I don't know. My idea was 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 afternoons seem like a good time to do it. Think about whether you would 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: 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 had stopped working, and he 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, and was 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 possibly 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 claimed they would? Second, why expect someone can suddenly do what they have never done 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 Yeee-haw!

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

Anna A path can never rise above its claims, and it can never rise above 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 once demonstrated the ability to deliver eternal life.

Owen I guess that's why they're called futile remedies. They can't cure what ails you.

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 would be like Maria searching the back walls of a room for a hidden passageway to the outside.

Tyler I'm sorry, which one of you is Maria?

David Oops. Sorry, Tyler. That was from the story we read last time. You'll find copies of previous stories and our conclusions on the table over there.

Paul So what are some futile remedies?

Cooper How about self-help methods? Think of all the books, seminars, encounter groups, diets, positive thinking, you name it.

Jose Yeah, they fit perfectly. They can be very 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 said it could.

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 around the corner.

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

Elliot Me and my big mouth.

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 accounts 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 does, 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 in the process. If he didn't have something to do with life after death, he would hardly be relevant.

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, faithful members of the covenant. This is where you reap the reward of your labors. You get to vote. Here is how it works. This stone represents a path, several actually: self help, science, aliens, etc. If we vote to go down this path, then we set aside the book and study these topics in detail. If that well runs dry, we return to the book. However, if we vote against this path, then we set it aside. This does not mean we never go back to it, or know for sure it's wrong. It only means we deem it an unlikely path to eternal life, and we would rather spend our limited resources looking elsewhere. A vote of yes means we detour down this path. A vote of no means we set it aside and continue with the book. There are presently nine members in the covenant. According to the rules, three-fourths of us must vote one way or the other. Math geeks, how many is that?

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

David To be honest, I'm not sure. We will deal with that if it happens. Here we go. How many vote yes? That's Barb and Elliot. 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?"

"Resting? Why? So I can live one more month? You don't think anything useful will come of them do you."

"Haven't these issues been debated for centuries? What do you expect to find that others didn't?"

"Others may have debated, but until now 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 sneered. "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 are so sure you're right with such little effort, so sure that you discourage me from finding out on my own?"

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 purposely shunned all contact with the civilized world. Although their primitive village was not far from a

modern town, no one had ever entered it. 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, "Long ago the gods spoke into my heart and informed me about that place. They made it clear that we may walk right 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 from above told me that they are not human; look at how they dress. So they would never show us hospitality."

A woman interjected, "Should we not look to life's experiences to inform us? Many beautiful people have shown me kindness and love over the course of my life. There could not possibly be a single soul in that village who would do us any harm."

Someone else jumped in. "You've lived a sheltered life. The people I've known are selfish and only look out for themselves. To avoid starvation, we will have to take their food by force. My spear is sharpened and ready."

Next a man stood up and spoke. "This tells us nothing. Go to the outskirts of the large village and look for yourselves as I have. I saw no cattle, no crops, and no fruit trees. There were strange huts which they rarely leave. I tell you, 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 hiked 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 if we aren't careful.
- 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 in the first place? 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 guess most 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 presumption story, where someone tries to build an entire man from a single tooth.
- David Well said, Liz. When searching for eternal life, we leave nothing to conjecture. Let's hike to the large village.
- Latisha Do you mind if I bring up a related topic?
- David Of course. We want everyone to contribute.
- 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 It relates, but if you don't mind me saying so, I think it's one more incomplete source we must be cautious about. We can't independently verify these visions, and they leave the most important questions unanswered.
- Latisha It still gives me hope.
- David Thanks for bringing it up. 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 and Latisha raised their hands.)
- David The vote is no, seven to two.
- 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 had some kids, but they live a long ways 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 nearer. What's golden about that? But you're not supposed to talk like that. It's not positive and cheerful. That's why I come here. At least you people don't have your head in the sand. Just don't take too long finding the cure, okay? 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 really 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 who longed for a happy life. Conditions were not pleasant due to 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 they were older, they had 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 won't have anything to do with families. Don't bother asking me why because I decided long ago to never talk about the subject with anyone."

Another one said, "Years ago, this boy who lived with a family did something truly dreadful to me, so ever since I've stayed away from families."

When she talked to another youth, he told her, "A lot of their rituals don't suite my taste: doing everything together, getting family pictures taken. Imagine if I had to sing songs around a piano. Not cool."

An orphan girl, said, "Most of them were a different color. Those people are weird."

"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 all a 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 thinking that when I was six and have never questioned it since."



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 I know people who keep away from religion for each of those teenagers' reasons.

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 excuse, 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, only because of how it's offered?

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 this kind of bigotry.

Latisha Bigotry? That's too strong a word.

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

Barb 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 Barb 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 didn't think we needed to vote on attitudes like this, but I don't mind checking. Does anyone believe that having an anti-religious bias is a good thing? (No one moved.) Now's your chance. If you don't speak up, we expect you to carry no religious prejudice from here on.

David stood up and waited a full half minute to let the point sink in. A few stared at the floor.

David This Sunday I'll be starting the door-to-door surveying I told you about. Come if you want. 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 outside. 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.

Those who attended the discussions so far:

David	Cooper
Karl	Hank
Paul	Anna
Sandra	Elliot
Mary	Owen
Liz	Geoff
Jose	Tyler
Barb	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 the article. To his relief it gave a fair portrayal, and his was the only name given, but he wondered who they interviewed for it.

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

"I read it," David said. "I guess it was 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."

"I'm worried about more cars parked on the street. How long before my neighbors complain?"

"You've got that big 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."

"I've been waiting for you to ask. Nothing personal, but I'm just not wired that way. It's worked great for you guys. Don't worry, I'm still coming."

"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, only two people came for the door-to-door visits, Anna and Jose. David said, "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 another question. 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 newspaper today?" David told her they were. When they asked her the question, she replied, "No thanks, I'm not interested."

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 when he died. "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?"

"Nothing convinced me. I just decided to believe it. I'm not too sure when that was."

At another house, an elderly man answered that eternal life isn't important. Jose asked if he would explain why. "I don't know what there is to explain. It's not important. I'm not worried about what will happen 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, "I think I'm going to scream."

David nodded in agreement. "This is a bit unsettling, isn't it? 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 something like this. Don't you know that Western culture has an unwritten rule that we never talk about spiritual matters except in highly regulated settings? I like the rule. It keeps conversations limited to safe subjects like the economy or the latest gossip. It intimidates you religious types from bringing up a subject we'd rather avoid. The rule works, since you seldom hear people discussing this sort of thing. I suppose what you are doing would be considered wise and noble in some cultures, but in this enlightened country it's considered bad manners. The rule was probably started by some atheists or people who hate religion, like me. If you believed in the Devil, I expect he'd be delighted with it. 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 of fans to get some 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 said, "My name is Pan, and 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, "Pan, here is our method. A few weeks ago we started as if we knew nothing, and have been slowly building pillars of truth. There they are by the picture window."

"That sounds wise," said Pan. "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 start 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 all 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 three evenings a week watching videos. 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. The boy was in the seventh grade. Ken's cousin also lived in that town. In fact, he was the 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 too 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 some real proof, please don't bother me with these stories."

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 son?"

"You know how people get their facts wrong; 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 always 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 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 he was right.

Paul I've seen every one of those used to explain away accounts 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 must be there.

Sandra If they can't find the hole now, they assume 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 don't happen. This would be a radical shift in my thinking.

Tyler I hear about miracles too, but I don't think they happen.

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 It's common knowledge.

Paul That's not a very convincing argument.

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 accounts of miracles that were obviously not written 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 these 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 discovered the transistor yet.

Philip But they believed God sends the rain.

Sandra I believe God sends the rain.

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

David I teach history at Vanberth.

Philip This is not my day. All right. What do you say?

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

David labeled a stone "Anti-supernatural Bias."

Tyler Aren't you guys going to vote on this one?

David This stone reminds us to resist anti-supernatural prejudice, so we aren't blinded to the truth like Ken was. Do you think anyone in the covenant is opposed to that, Tyler?

Tyler I guess not.

After most 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 a half 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 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 a little 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 just don't know how to break into the little conversation groups once they are formed. It seems to come naturally for everyone else."

"Why don't you just go home?"

"I'd feel just as 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, 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."

"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 semi-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 half 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 start 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 replied.

"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, but she says she's busy with her garden now."



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 cases.

"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 asked a third fellow, "What's your story?"

"I haven't paid my taxes for 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 throws guys in prison for having their 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 out there, 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 mistake or two."

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 fighting.
- 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. As long we are better than them, we think that makes us a good person. It's completely backward.
- 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.
- Paul David, do you mind if I bring up four short points on this topic?
- David Go right ahead.
- Paul Number one: We all believe morality exists. In other words, there is such a thing as 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 unchecked. It should be stopped, preferably through the reformation of the evildoer, otherwise 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 that is wrong. Anyone disagree?

People looked around to see if anyone would speak up, but no one did. David started to look agitated.

Paul Number four: In our pride, we unjustly minimize the evil we do and instead focus on the evil done 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 was 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, let's say I 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 That is a good question. 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 hits me out of nowhere. I wonder what's next. You know Karl, this search just expanded to something beyond looking for eternal life."

"Expanded to what?"

"Staying out of jail."

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. "There aren't many street lights, and it's a long way to the bus stop." 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 stuff 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 half 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 hurry back and get it."

"Come on." Cooper protested. "I'm not driving all the way home just for some dumb 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 smile, "Hey, Paul, you got your necklace?"

Paul put his hand on his neck and gasped, "Oh no, I forgot it! Sorry David, I'll rush home right now and get it."

David said, "That's okay, just bring—"

Paul had already started running toward the street. He yelled, "I'll be right back. I want to support the covenant, so I need to go get it."

David looked over at Cooper, who 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 several company directives. However, four of the new employees were not following the owner's instructions, which caused 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 had an inspiration for taking the company in a new direction. I've been busy doing research on my idea."

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

"Because if I owned this company, that's what I would do."

The second employee answered, "I heard about the company directives, but I never saw anything written down."

"All you had to do was ask me."

"I didn't think they were important. I've got a lot of things 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 started here, I saw the way the production floor was laid out and I couldn't believe it. I'm not sure someone like that should be running the company."

"How do you know he was the one who laid out the production floor?"

"It must have been. And why is he taking such a long trip at this crucial time? He should be here."

The fourth employee said, "I've worked here two 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 all the other employees who've been here a while."

"I'm not willing to take your word for it. I can dream up of all kinds of reasons why you might be lying, so at least one of them has to be right. By the way, didn't you hire five? Where is the other one?"

"She showed respect for the owner's directives and followed them faithfully. I hope the next ones I hire to replace you four are 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 and bosses.

- Paul The word *fear* in this phrase 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 spits on a policeman's shoe 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 that I'm like the fourth employee. That doesn't motivate me.
- David Maybe this will. I'm pretty close to you in my belief about God. Can you look me in the eye and tell me that you have done everything you need to in order 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. And we had better get the right answer. This is one question you can't afford to be wrong on.
- David That's enough about the fourth employee. Let's talk about the other three.
- Mary I might be guilty of being like the first employee. That person imagined what the owner was like, before he or she ever met him.
- Karl Me too. The statement, "that's what I would do," reminded me of myself. I presume God is like me.
- Paul Some use that to prove there is no God. They say that if there were a God, he would do more miracles to prove himself because that's what they would do. What they are really saying is, "If there were a God, he would act just like me." When no God is found who acts like them, they think they have proven that no God exists.
- Karl Sounds a little arrogant, doesn't it?
- Jose The second employee reminded me of myself. I've always figured there is a God out there somewhere, but I ignored him. Not anymore.
- Mary Go Jose!
- David Anyone identify with the third employee?
- Anna Since this is true confessions night I haven't been too impressed with the way God runs the world. But, maybe some of my accusations aren't deserved. What do I know about running the world, anyway?
- Liz That employee thought it justified ignoring the owner.

Sandra These four employees depict much of the world's attitude toward God.

David After our Sunday door-to-door visits, I'm starting to agree with you. I don't know why people are like that, but hopefully it won't be the case here.

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 exactly what is he like? We won't imagine him, ignore him, misjudge him or play any other games. 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.

Hank I want to say something to you covenant members. You ain't too bad.

David Thanks, Hank.

In Brooklyn, New York, Ezra Rubin slowly descended the stairs of his apartment building to get his mail. The handrail had been in need of repair for months, so he reached his hand to the wall for balance. In his mail he found a large envelope. Ezra quickly noticed Ashbow in the return address, but it wasn't from his son. *Joseph. I wonder what I could be getting from David's cousin.* Up in his apartment, Ezra opened the envelope and removed the Sunday paper with the 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 rushed 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.

The man who opened the door 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 at age twelve."

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

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

"Are you going to call him, Ezra?"

"Not now. I don't want to do anything that might distract him. He has to do this 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. He always had a good heart. In some ways, I'm surprised it took him this long to finally do something like this."

"I see they are meeting three evenings a week."

"That is just like 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 meetings?"

"It is right after supper."

"I was thinking a little exercise at the start of the meeting might get our blood moving, jumping jacks or something like that. But now I'm not sure."

"Why not?"

"I get this picture of my dad saying, 'David, relax.'"



Comparing Religions

Li and Wang were traveling through a remote desert area. Sandstorms and a host of other troubles had overwhelmed them, such that they lost their mounts and supplies. These men 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 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 close at hand, Li and Wang split up so each could inquire about the water at two villages.

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 but not too much. 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 secrets of obtaining moisture from dew and extracting it from plants. They admitted that this is barely enough to live on and 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 their learned from their fathers. 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."

"Now 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," said Li 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 used 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 unkind to say one village is right and another wrong, and if we insist on this, it could lead to them fighting with each other."

"Listen to me, Li. We need that water, and therefore we need the truth, even if someone's feelings might get hurt. Give up your assertion that everybody must be equal. I can't explain why they gave us four different answers. Life is filled with inequities. Denying their existence doesn't make them go away. 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, and if so, where."

"Of course you are right, Wang. Let's 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 suicides?

Latisha Of course not. Nobody believes that. I mean the major world religions.

Paul But they sharply disagree on the most fundamental concepts, such as who created the universe and if there's a God or not.

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 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 very 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, and make 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 evil . . . yet.
- David How about you, Geoff?
- Geoff I know I sound just like Li, but wars have been fought over religion.
- Sandra Wars are caused by violent and evil people. Religion is only their excuse. Other times the excuse is ethnic, political or economic differences. I agree with Wang. Should we handcuff our search for life just because someone else might fight over it?
- Karen, who had only listened to the discussions up until now, spoke up from the crowd.
- Karen 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 practice their faith or seek the

truth about God. Their country's religion is only an empty label. This is true in the East and West. In my opinion, it is a mistake to view all the inhabitants of a country as Christian, Muslim or Buddhist. That may be true in their mouths, but most people are practical atheists because they ignore 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.

Anna 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. I didn't talk to you very nicely. Sorry."

"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. You're getting some notoriety. When you get rich and famous, don't forget your family, okay?"

"Rich is something I won't get from this," David said.

"I might have to stop by and check out your tent meeting."

"Really?"

"I said *might*. Does your dad know about this?"

"I don't know what I would tell him. We're still searching. I need to do this on my own."

"If you say so. Catch you later."

CHAPTER 6

Wednesday

Someone in the back asked, "Could you explain those three stacks of stones and what's written on them?"

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. On that table are handouts about each stone."

"You've got everything on paper, so why do you need these pillars of stone?"

"Those pillars represent our efforts to date. Everything we do going forward is built upon them. We are working with intangible concepts, so these give us a visible depiction of our progress."

Another person said, "You've been meeting all these weeks, and you've talked mostly about attitudes?"

"That's right," boasted Jose. "We might be slow, but we are reeally ready."



Indigenous Religions

A long time ago in a far off land, a race of people lived in a broad valley. Their land was surrounded on all sides by towering mountains, which no one ever crossed. The valley was populated by numerous villages, where

the people supported themselves by farming and raising animals. The valley had natural advantages such as abundant water, fertile soil, and a favorable climate. These and other benefits made it 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. But the biggest tragedy was that everyone got the disease. No exceptions.

On 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: as you know, we all suffer with 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 just down the road? Before the break of dawn tomorrow, I intend to set out in search of a cure. Is there anyone within the sound of my voice 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 immediately 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, please bring it back here 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 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 to question him. This was a typical conversation with a priest. "Tell us about the results of your treatment for the disease," they asked.

The priest said, "I don't know if it ever cured anyone. Only the gods know that."

"Then why do you 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. We assume it came 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?"

"We don't see a need for that. What matters is that we are loyal to our traditions, as they are to theirs."

"Has any priest tried to apply your treatment outside this village?"

"No. Why should we 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 too 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 well documented?"

"If you mean written down? 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 build 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 priesthoods was a brief mention in the local 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 very little 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 nations or ethnic groups. The priests stand for the local religion of each group. All ethnic groups originally had an ancient, indigenous religion at one time. Many still do, mostly in the less developed parts of the world. In other parts of the world, the native religion was extinguished by a major world religion like Buddhism, Islam or Christianity. These were the extinct religions talked about at the end of the story.

Paul That was good, Owen. Have you been studying on the side?

David I hope every one of you is reading about religions on the side.

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 point was brought out that they have no written scriptures, no historical record of their origin and no proofs for their beliefs. I would say that is pretty 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 ethnic 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 now.
- 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 worth keeping.
- Latisha This represents a lot of faiths, practiced by a lot of people, for a lot of years. 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 if I'm honest, my gut tells me we won't find anything behind this door. Nobody else has, so why would we?
- Cooper When these people practice their local religion, very few are looking for eternal life. Their rituals and beliefs are simply part of their cultural heritage.
- 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. Anna voted no. David made a stone called "Indigenous Religions." With it, 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."

"Oh yeah, 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 a Sunday."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"Well, how's this sound? The dad was a drunk, and the mom was the worst gossip I ever knew. 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 not taking any more chances. I'm keeping my distance."

Friday

As seven o'clock approached, people streamed to the tent behind David's house. By now they were getting over forty 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 David didn't know what to make of it. Anna, however, 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 to 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 better individuals, families, and societies."

"What about the gods or the beginning and end of the world?"

"We have nothing to say about any of those topics. That's for other professions."

Since this man did not promise a cure, the pilgrims thanked him and departed.

In that same land, the three sojourners heard of another type of healer, this one less formally established. Seeking out one of its teachers, they asked if he would explain their method. He said he would be glad to and the four of them sat down to converse.

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 our lives here in peace and happiness."

"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."

"Interesting, but do not leave us in suspense, sir. 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 of 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 on one end of town. Arriving there, they inquired at the house of a scholar.

The scholar began. "Welcome, weary travelers. 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 too? 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 what they were in ancient times. I must admit, we make almost 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, and those of my dear wife, 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 tell us to give 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 good poetry.
- Karl The 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 sacrifice?
- Barb She's right. It will come down to whether we vote to detour there, or keep going like the pilgrims did.
- Sandra The real question is, 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 later generations of Taoists gave up on their search for immortality, then 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 has shrunk. The pilgrims made an issue of the fact that he was the only prophet. Does that really matter?
- In the crowd that evening was a man named Anwar, who decided to join the discussion.
- Anwar I can 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 would do exactly the same thing is far, far

less. Add even more witnesses, and the chance of them all being wrong approaches zero.

Tyler It's not uncommon to have whole groups deceived over something.

Anwar 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 some 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. This can present a difficulty in separating actual witness accounts from rumors. In this case, it isn't too 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, their rituals, their literature, and their 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 and rituals. 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 be happy to 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 a couple 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 Having all those cars on the street would be a bigger problem. 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 recently read. "It showed 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 struck a deep chord and gave me a lot of hope. You should read it."

Paul asked, "How do you know this author was telling you the truth about God?"

She replied, "I could tell he was right because I liked what he was saying, and it made 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—much older—I might take up that question. I'm having way too much fun right now. I've got my cabin, my buddies, my wide screen TV, and a few vices if you know what I mean. 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 cut short, and you'll never get the chance to deal with that question?"

"Why would I think about something depressing like that? I'm squeezing all the gusto out of life while I can."

Walking down the sidewalk, Paul said, "I think someone's been taking his philosophy of life from commercials."

At the next house a young man answered their question with, "It's interesting you should ask about that. I've been learning a lot about religions lately."

"Is that so," Elliot said. "Where have you been learning it?"

"I've seen a bunch of documentaries on TV."

"Are you sure they're giving an unbiased presentation?"

"They wouldn't put it on TV if it weren't true."

When they surveyed a woman at the next house, she replied, "I respect everyone's religious beliefs."

David suggested, "Come join our evening discussions, and you can share your views on religions."

"I would never want to tell anyone what they should believe."

"We want as many perspectives as we can get to keep us from fooling ourselves."

"I don't think I have the time, but I wouldn't worry about your conclusions. Whatever you decide will be good, and I will respect it."

At the next house a man answered, "For some reason, I've been thinking about that subject a lot lately." They told him about the meetings. "You mean people do that kind of thing? Can I come?"

"Absolutely. It's for everyone."

He ran and got a pen and paper to write down David's address. "Thank you, fellows for taking your Sunday afternoons to do this. I bet it isn't easy. I'll see you tomorrow night."

On the front sidewalk, David exclaimed, "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 spent a couple hours at city hall this morning and thankfully 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 were amazed to find many doctors and wise men offering all kinds 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. This is just 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 and ours is only one. Some of our people follow one God, some follow many gods and some 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 of our people 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 agree with us that the medicines of those villages will be ineffective."

"Not at all. Use those medicines. As I already said, we believe there are many cures."

"Do you believe, as they do in some villages, that God is the one who 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 to health."

"Do you know who they were and the context in which they taught?"

"No."

"In that you are similar to the first villages we encountered."

"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 of 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 opinion of man begins?"

"The line is blurred, but this is of no concern since our system 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. We are proud of it."

"Why should we follow it?"

"You don't have to, if you have your own. However, we do think our treatment makes sense. It works for us."

"What is the cure like?"

"Here is how it works: 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 eventually escape the process."

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 for a while. 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 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 God as they would like him to be 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, is there anyone who still thinks all religions teach the same thing?
- Jose Not me. Each one defines the key features very differently: the problem, the cure, and God.
- Owen On this whole 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 clean, then I'm gone.
- Liz I agree. It's not eternal life, at least not anything worth seeking.
- Latisha I've got a teenage daughter whom my husband and I love dearly, and I liked 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 they do 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. I think the book implies that this is a negative, but I've always seen that as a positive.
- Jose Why?
- Barb Because I don't like some proselytizer pushing his views on me.
- Paul It all hinges on how you see your situation. If you're sick, you welcome people offering a cure. If you're well, you resent it and call it pushy. Aren't we all here because we're looking for a cure?
- Barb I know what you're saying, but I still have a problem with it.
- Karl I think it's an excellent test of a religion. No one knows a faith like its followers. If none of them think it is worth our time, why should we disagree?

Tyler Barb, I feel just like you do. I hate to have religion pushed on me.

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 good 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?"

"I've been on the force for over fifteen years. I know every cop in Ashbow."

"I'm glad to hear it," David said, tongue in cheek. "I feel a little safer in case hecklers show up."

The next day, Elliot made his regular 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 happened to come by on his rounds. He updated Elliot on his grandfather's condition, which had gotten worse lately. "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 way up north for a week of camping and fishing. I used to think that if I ever got married, he would be a groomsman in my wedding. 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 a lot 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 occupied too, so she sat over on the edge.



Miscellaneous Religions

The three voyagers journeyed on through the valley and came to a large town. In the central marketplace was a bazaar which attracted sages and healers from all over the valley. "This is fortunate," said one of the pilgrims. "We can sample the valley's ideas without continuing to wear out our feet." They asked the locals inhabitants if there was a section of the bazaar that provided medicine for the disease. 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. They did this all the forenoon, and after a lunch break, carried on into the afternoon.

At one booth, a disciple explained to them, "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, for he was a charming and dynamic leader, as well as a spellbinding speaker."

"Today we have spoken to several who claim the unique cure. Do you also make that claim?"

"Yes, ours is the only cure that will work. All others are in error, false prophets really."

"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. Others did, and that is why stories grew up in later generations of a few miracles he did."

"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 met so many who argue that they possess the only cure. They are right in one thing, only one of them can be correct."

"Maybe they are all correct but don't know it."

"If they cannot even tell who has the correct cure, then 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 we've heard about."

"I agree, especially since this prophet could not even cure himself."

The pilgrims moved down the street. As they passed another booth, the devotee inside called to them, "Our treatment springs 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, to reform it."

"We have met many of your kind today. I suppose you have only one founder, and he was a powerful leader, a dynamic speaker, and a charming personality."

"You know him!"

"Out of all those who broke away from the original treatment, I suppose you claim 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 trust 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 you do this."

The medium explained, "We must use only 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, "I forgot to mention, 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. I don't trust him."

As the sun was setting, they neared the end of the street and spotted a man sitting on a bench. They engaged him in conversation and asked if he had come there seeking medicine for the disease.

The self-healer told them, "I have already found a cure."

"Where did you discover 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 choose what suits my tastes."

"How do you know it will work?"

"It makes sense to me, so I assume it will work."

"We have talked with others who fashioned a homemade cure which made sense to them, but theirs were very different from yours."

"I would assume those cures will work too."

As they left this man on the bench, John said, "I would not trust such a man to prescribe the right 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 today, some died out centuries ago.

Liz How many are there?

Cooper Hundreds. Some of them only won a handful of converts.

Geoff Is it true they are started by one person?

Paul Almost all of them.

David That, I think, is a real weak point. Putting all 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 theirs is the only right path?

Paul A lot. Others say everyone is right. That is just as hard to believe since they are mutually exclusive.

Latisha Why does everyone keep focusing on the differences between religions?

Jose Because we want the truth. One says there is an all powerful God and one says there is none. One says we will be reincarnated and one says we won't. Are those minor differences?

Latisha They aren't minor, but maybe there is some way 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 everybody. But if you refuse to 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 wrong.

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 what the odds are?

David Check their references. They stayed small or died out, which means very few of the people close to them thought they were authentic.

- Liz The next part of the story talked about factions who break off from one of the major religions and form a splinter group.
- Sandra There have been a lot of those also, and it happens in every major faith. They have much in common with the small religions we just talked about.
- Tyler Like basing everything on only one person.
- Paul The strongest argument against them is their bold claim that everyone before them got it wrong, including those in their own faith, but they finally got it right. They never have better proofs than the founders of the faith, and they never have evidence that the faith became corrupt as they claim. Their main weapon is clever words and bluster. Amazingly, some people fall for it.
- Karl I think a few of these splinter groups grew very large.
- 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, very 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 onto the next topic, which was . . . ?
- Barb Spiritism, or talking to your dead Aunt Norma. So does anyone think it's a con?
- Elliot Yes.
- Geoff We can't be sure.
- Anna We aren't going to solve that argument 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 you don't know how to get there? You die and you're there.
- David That's leaving way too much to guesswork, hoping I'll end up in the right place. The whole purpose of this search is to discover the right way 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 that person is the founder and prophet.

Sandra Does that work? Can you assemble your own belief system by borrowing what you want?

Karl I see its appeal. You build whatever you like. But it's hard to see how you'd be right. 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 a little 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 likely get forty versions, even from those who profess the same religion. Why? Because we pick and choose, just like the man in the story. We fool ourselves and think we can pick the truth to match our tastes. We know others disagree and that we can't all be right. So we assume others are a bit off, but we have it right, the same thing every founder of a splinter group 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. We have seen this in the Sunday door-to-door visits, but we do it too. We hand pick our truths, and deep down inside are convinced we did it better than the next guy. I think they call that arrogance.

Jose Are you saying we are all wrong?

Paul No. But finding the truth takes work and you get there through humility, avoiding presumption, fearing deception, and so on.

Mary We've been through those already, but now they are starting to make 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, even if we insist that there are 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 topics 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 a little. How is she doing?"

"Not good. 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 their cars, 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 to see people staying afterward to socialize." As David kept watching the crowd, he noticed Paul standing by himself, looking a little self conscious.

The next day, David scurried across the lawn in front of the Student Union at Vanberth. His informal mentor, Evelyn, caught him from behind. "David. In a hurry are we?"

"Evelyn. I've got a few minutes, especially for you. Wasn't the last time we had a chance to visit the first day of the semester?"

"It was," Evelyn said. "I've been meaning to ask you about the meetings at your house. Do you know people have been talking about it?"

David stopped walking. "They have? 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?"

"How much time do you have? It's been the most unique experience of my life, and I've got a feeling the ride will only get wilder."

"You sound worried."

"I'm worried I might disappoint those who are coming." David decided not to mention Mary's cancer. He knew she wouldn't want that getting out, especially with people talking.

"Why do think it's on your shoulders?"

"I've also met this 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."

Evelyn said, "I bet your parents had a good marriage. I can tell from their son."

"Thank you. They did have a good marriage, so don't ask me why I'm thirty-five and still single. 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 may be Jewish, but they aren't very 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 usually 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 passed through new regions, but also some they had visited before. They came upon a man who was sitting in a temple meditating, so they stopped to converse with him. "We have seen men and women like you in many villages throughout this part of the valley. Would you tell us about yourself?"

The monk said, "I am a Buddhist. Our founder broke away from Hinduism centuries ago because that faith 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 these. You must deem them quacks and charlatans."

"We pride ourselves on tolerance and recommend those peddlers as worthy providers of a cure. We would never think of telling other villages how to alleviate the disease."

"Tell us about your cure."

"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 inevitably 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 us 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 might disagree, but we are flexible."

"Did your founder perform any miracles?"

"He considered miracles unimportant. In later generations, some stories of a few miracles may have grown up around 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 a little more comfortable while the disease slowly 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 both misguided and doomed to failure."

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 getting monotonous and wearying. They're all starting to sound alike. It would be much easier to believe that all cures work, or that none works. Either way, we could go home."

James and John encouraged her. "We are not doing this for our entertainment. Have you forgotten what is at stake? Our very lives and those of our loved ones. Men and women have endured far more than this for far less treasure."

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.

Liz I've heard Americans talk like that, but only when discussing religion and philosophy. They quickly abandon that nonsense when results are needed, like getting the car fixed. Why is that?

David It seems like one more way in which people don't take spiritual truths seriously. It's almost like a game to some of them.

Mary It's not a game to me.

Sandra Anyone still think all religions teach basically the same thing?

Geoff We get it, Sandra. People will acknowledge the fundamental differences between faiths, but they act like it doesn't matter.

Anna You can do and believe anything you want, and it will all work out in the end.

Cooper Would anyone see a doctor with that philosophy?

Karl Buddhism is like 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 so many 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 That's a 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 veer away from that view and teach more of a 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. We should just trust him.

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 might be 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. 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 on 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 said 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."

"It could be that guy hiding in the woods," chuckled David.

"What?"

"Haven't you seen him? He crawls on his stomach up to the edge of the yard, I assume so he can listen in."

"And you're not going to chase him away?"

"Not at all. If he's too shy to come the normal way, I don't mind."

CHAPTER 8

The following day, Saturday evening, a man walked up the sidewalk of a house in an upscale part of Ashbow. He knocked on the 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, Mr. Peterson."

"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? There was an article in the paper."

"Of course," Peterson said.

"Are you concerned about them?"

"It depends which way they go. I assume you have been attending."

"I have," said the man, "and I've been active in the debates. They get around 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 pretty fast."

"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 have debated a few zealots in my day. I see you brought a notepad. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have they talked about miracles yet?"

"Yes. They say to avoid anti-supernatural bias."

"How quaint," observed Peterson. "Miracles are easy to refute by proposing hallucinations or group conspiracies. It's true these are also rare, but since they don't require miracles, people believe them much more easily. Some clever ones try to play scientist and claim that a miracle shows that nature is occasionally non-uniform. All you need to do is accuse them of bad data. The data must be bad because everyone knows that nature never breaks its own rules."

"What do you mean by 'bad data?'"

"Accuse the witness of being mistaken."

"What if I can't prove that?"

"Doesn't matter. It's assumed he did, even if we can't prove it. That will be enough for those with any inclination to disbelieve miracles."

"Good idea."

"Another ploy is to predict that someday future understanding 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. This is trivial to bring down. You appeal to the common knowledge that these so called prophets routinely stretch the truth and have a self serving motive; therefore, they must be judged with a different standard. It always warms my heart when a fake is exposed. They make it so much easier to condemn all religious zealots. And don't forget the argument from silence. Use it to twist someone's words into saying anything you want. It's like a blank check. For example, when you came into my house, you never said you were married. I can argue that something so important would never be left unsaid, so this clearly 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. Don't worry. They won't look beneath the surface to test what you're saying. If all else fails, tell them truth is relative. It's a good escape hatch when the case seems to be lost.

"So I just say truth is relative?"

"No, no. That's too obvious. You disguise it with phrases like, 'Let's find common ground between these two incompatible facts,' or 'Though we

disagree, I'm glad for you,' or 'This is religion, not history.' It gives them nowhere to go. That's enough for tonight, but do come back if you want more tutoring."

"Thank you for your time."

"I'm always happy to advance the cause of truth."

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? Since you are determined to find an answer, you will naturally convince yourselves of something, just like all religious believers."

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. James told his companions, "I've read about their practices, but let's hear from one of them directly." 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 will be pleased to tell you all I know. I practice Islam, and our cure comes from 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 steer toward 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."

"If you had said all medicines are the same, we would question your common sense. 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?"

"As I'm sure you discovered in your travels, long ago God sent prophets to every village, but the message got corrupted over time. Finally, God sent one more prophet, our founder, peace be upon him. He gave us the cure this book describes."

"I have heard that your treatment is related to Judaism and Christianity. Is it true you claim that these two became corrupt, requiring your founder to appear and correct them, restoring us to the truth?"

"Yes, that is what he did."

John's smile disappeared.

James asked, "Is it also true that your faith hangs entirely upon this one man being correct?"

"Yes, but 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 scriptures of Judaism and Christianity point to our founder."

"Don't you accuse those scriptures 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."

"In our travels, we've met dozens of men who make this claim: "All other religions are in error and corrupt, but I alone can restore you to the truth." Out of all those men, why should we believe your founder is the correct one?"

"Our greatest proof is our holy book. If you study it, you will become convinced in your heart of its divine origin."

"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 a few that appear miraculous. This is a simple sleight-of-hand trick."

"If you still require proof, there are the miracles and predictions of Muhammad. 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 of Muhammad are found in your traditions, the Hadith."

"Correct."

"Suppose there was a murder trial, and the prosecution brought in one hundred witnesses to the actual murder. The judge quickly discredited ninety-eight, but couldn't prove that the other two were unreliable. These two were not eyewitnesses to the murder, but had only sixth-hand hearsay evidence. In other words, someone told someone who told someone until it got to these two. It turns out all one hundred had only hearsay evidence. Will the judge convict this man of murder?"

"Perhaps not."

"This is what you are asking us to put our faith in. Your Hadith were passed down from man to man for two hundred years, and then compilers threw out all but a small percent, but even those few were hearsay."

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.

Cooper It's got the promise, but not the proof.

Elliot Not so fast, let's talk about it. Just because everything hangs on the word of one person, Muhammad, does that make him wrong?

Paul Of course it doesn't make him wrong, 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?

Anna I'm with Paul. I want more than one guy saying, "Trust me, I'm the right one."

Elliot Doesn't Muhammad claim to be the last in a long line of prophets? So is he really standing alone?

David If you read the prophets who came before, Hebrew or otherwise, they directly contradict Muhammad and his message. He gets around this by saying that the reason the messages disagree is that the others are corrupted, although there's no proof of corruption. In other words, the evidence that he was sent by the same God who spoke to earlier prophets has unfortunately been lost. You'll just have to take his word for it.

Anna What about the other proofs?

Tyler It's common knowledge that these so called prophets routinely stretch the truth and have a self serving motive; therefore, they must be judged with a different standard.

Elliot That isn't common knowledge, Tyler, and it isn't even true.

Tyler Well, truth is relative. Wait, what I mean is, let's find common ground between these two incompatible facts.

Sandra Tyler, what in the world are you talking about?

Tyler Never mind.

Owen What was that about the Quran containing scientific facts?

Karl I read about that. Someone found a few words in the Quran that sound like a scientific fact and claim it was predicted. I could do

the same thing with any book. As the story pointed out, why do they only *find* these after science does?

Mary Let's go to the miracles. What does the Quran say?

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 enough to explain it to us?

Cooper I have. Besides his words in the Quran, Muhammad had other sayings and deeds, which his followers passed down orally or in written form. This went on for two hundred years, until several men began collecting them in a few books. They found thousands of accounts that contradicted each other and were obviously phony. After thorough study, they threw almost all of them out as unreliable, and kept the remaining few.

Jose Two hundred years of passing them from one person to the next, and then most of them were thrown out? I don't know about the rest of you, but this doesn't fill me with confidence.

Barb To be fair to the Muslims, they don't appeal to Muhammad's miracles as a main proof.

David I can see why.

Barb Their greatest proof is the Quran itself.

Latisha Besides the scientific proofs we discussed, what else about the Quran proves it's legit?

Barb The remaining proofs are all subjective: it's a great piece of literature, it has a great message, it's been well preserved, and it was written by an illiterate man. I've been told, "Read it, and your heart will tell you this must be the truth."

Sandra It's not just Muslims who use that line. All kinds of faiths use that as their main proof, apparently since they don't have anything better. Obviously it doesn't work since all those faiths can't be true.

Mary Remember the story of the trapped miners? We discover spiritual truths the same way we discover other truths.

David Would you fly on a plane if the mechanic said, "This plane is safe; my heart told me it was"?

Erik was a relative newcomer who had been carefully listening up until now.

Erik Is there a Muslim in the crowd who would answer a question for me?

Muslim I am a Muslim, and I will try.

Erik In spite of what's been said here, I'm still 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 our high school teachers told us precisely what was needed to graduate, and we could trust them. Any chance this is only your personal view?

Muslim This is the common view of all good Muslims.

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. Anna, Barb and Elliot voted yes. The other eleven voted no: David, Paul, Sandra, Mary, Jose, Cooper, Liz, Owen, Geoff, Tyler and Latisha. 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 long lecture on nutrition. She mentioned every natural food she had ever tasted. 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 threw up his hands, turned around, and wandered off mumbling to himself.

Wednesday

At the time of the evening meeting, a heavy rain fell. The crowd size was down, but all the covenant members were there. No one wanted to miss what came next.

Before they started, one of the newcomers complained. "You are barely skimming the surface of these religions. Every one of them has an extremely diverse offering of beliefs that you are not considering at all."

Anna replied, "Those are all opinions of men about the religion's founders and their teachings. We prefer to hear from the founders themselves, not hearsay."



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 and approached him. "Please tell us about your medicine, sir, for we are unfamiliar with it."

The monk said, "I practice Jainism. We splintered off from Hinduism long ago, when our first sages realized some changes were needed."

"Like the Buddhists. Do you insist we have no eternal soul, like they do?"

"No. We all 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 made sense to their followers."

The three thanked him for the information.

Down the road they saw a worshiper coming out of a different temple. When they questioned him, the worshiper 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 the teachings of our faith."

"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 method of his people."

"The Jain man we just spoke to does not devote himself to God, since he thinks God doesn't exist. The Muslim man does not prepare himself for reincarnation since he doesn't believe in it. What would you tell them?"

"That is their business. Our treatment is for Sikhs, but we are sure it is right."

"Because of your founder?"

"Yes. We had one founder, but he was a very great man. We put our trust in him."

The pilgrims graciously departed.

From there the pilgrims trekked to the center of the valley. Along the side of the road they saw a man studying a book and sat down next to him.

"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 to cure the disease, including the atheistic ones?"

"Yes."

The three pilgrims were completely astonished. John said, "Sir, with all due respect, we have walked the entire valley and our findings compel us overwhelmingly toward the opposite conclusion. If there is a God, he most certainly did not found all the world's religions."

"It may seem as if they contradict each other, but there are ways to make them appear harmonized if you are predisposed to do so. You emphasize that some religions became heavily corrupted over time, and some religions were appropriate only for ancient times. Furthermore, some differences are explained by advanced interpretations and some are dismissed by focusing 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 aside. Therefore, I fear you will not find peace. Now, if you will excuse us, we must go to a place near here, which we have not yet visited. Perhaps true peace can be found there."



Sandra You will probably tar and feather me for saying this, but I can't help myself. Does anyone still think all religions teach basically 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, uh, 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 at least they 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 a few days ago when the pilgrims were on the street with the minor religions and splinter groups, most of them started by one guy? These three religions would be right at home on that street. The only reason they are commonly listed with the world religions is their larger membership.
- Paul How many would agree with the following conclusion: Most of the world's religions were not started by prophets sent by God, but by false prophets promoting human ideas? Whether they were intentionally devious or sincerely trying to help, I don't know.
- Elliot I've always thought religions were man-made, so you've got my vote.
- Tyler Mine too.
- Paul Does anyone disagree with me?
- Karl It seems extreme to accuse so many of practicing a false religion. Could the world be that deceived? But I have to admit, the facts point to your conclusion, Paul. It seems most people don't want to face it, so they ignore the glaring differences and say everybody's right.
- 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 an agitator and cruel.
- 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's pretty much right.
- Paul So is there anyone left who disagrees with me? Were most religions man-made?
- Latisha I'm not ready to agree. I'd have to think about it some more.
- 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 by Friday the yard will be dried out."

CHAPTER 9

Friday



The Blessing of Abraham

The three pilgrims, nearing the end of their journey, traveled to a town known as the holy city. They 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 his patio under the shade of a palm tree.

The guests began by telling this man all about their travels through the valley, and what they had learned. Their host told them that he was well acquainted with the various treatments for the disease. Then James said, "Would you please tell us about your treatment, that is, 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 paradise. Unfortunately, our parents rebelled against their Maker, and so has everyone who has ever lived since. As a result 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 the religions we've encountered did not teach it either."

"You would not expect criminals to acknowledge their own wickedness."

"Let us hear about the origins of your beliefs. I suppose your faith hangs entirely on the words of one prophet."

"No."

"Then I expect 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!"

"A nation?" repeated John.

"Yes," the Jew said. "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 serve him faithfully, so that he can share all good things with them, forevermore. He demonstrated this with 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 establish a new world, free from evil, pain and death."

James interjected. "So you 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 thousands of years of faithfulness with the Jewish nation. None of the other religions you examined had a God who makes a pledge like this."

"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 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 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 words and deeds wrote down what they saw and heard."

"It isn't more than one person could 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 look 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, "Individuals who undeniably experienced God first-hand and informed the rest of us. They heard his voice, saw his works, and were sent to us with his message. The proof of their divine encounter is the supernatural hand of God."

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 spoke through them. This took place over many centuries."

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 corrupted?"

"Not a single one."

Now Jane jumped to her feet. She looked around at the other two but didn't say anything.

James resumed. "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 were sent by God. These were obvious supernatural events occurring over many centuries, sometimes witnessed by thousands. The second proof is fulfilled predictions. Our Scriptures record over two hundred distinct prophecies that came true, which further confirm that our prophets carried God's message. These were specific forecasts, and 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, sickness, and most importantly death, providing documented proof that God has the ability and desire 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?"

"Could an entire nation, throughout two thousand years of their history, lie about what they saw with their own eyes? These historical events happened before the whole nation, and are intimately fused with our people's 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 deeds and not just words."

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, who was still standing, began to smile. "Now, my beloved seekers, it is my great joy to inform you that I have saved the very best part for last."

All three jumped excitedly to their feet and shouted, "What?"

Their host continued, "The glorious hope of our faith is the new kingdom that God's Messiah will create where evil and death are no more. I am overjoyed to tell you that this kingdom has already begun, being 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 explained, "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. But it gets better, for the Messiah, or Christ, is not just 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, "God sent someone who is eminently qualified to heal us."

John asked with some trepidation, "Is it possible this all 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."

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 coming kingdom. Even as we speak, Christian men and women are laboring to carry this good news to 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."

"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.

James asked, "Christian, would you share what your book says the coming kingdom of God will be like?"

Christian responded, "Over 2,500 years ago, the Hebrew prophets predicted the kingdom of God. Jesus unveiled it two thousand years ago and will consummate it at his second coming. 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, no arrogance, no deceit and no sorrow there. 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 or violence or 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 what their beliefs were about eternal life.

At the first house, a man said, "I believe what the religions teach."

"Which ones?"

"It doesn't matter," he said, "All religions teach basically the same thing." When the three of them heard that, it took all their strength not to show a reaction. Liz faked a coughing spell to mask her grin.

Sandra recovered first and asked, "How familiar are you with the world's religions?"

"Not too familiar, but don't they all tell you to be a nice person?"

David answered, "In a way. Do you know what they teach about the afterlife?"

"Heaven, I guess."

"Do you think you will end up there?"

"I think so."

Outside Liz said, "Wow, I can't believe that. 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 met 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 God and 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 that Jewish guy's house?"

"Yes."

"I've heard a lot about you. I think it's marvelous what you're doing. Your question was about eternal life. 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. But, if Jesus returns first, I get to skip that painful step, like the baby who comes out by C-section. I'm so interested in your meetings. Can anyone come?"

"Yes."

"I don't know anything about you guys. Are you Christians?"

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. Otherwise, if I can help answer your questions, please don't hesitate to stop back."

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. They shouldn't talk like that."

"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 they voted on the last story. Those two never asked to join later.

David We can't put it off any longer. Let's hear your comments about Friday's story.

Latisha I was a little confused. Was that about Judaism or Christianity?

David Yes.

Elliot Spoken like a true diplomat. 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 It is for me. I was hoping for something more impartial.

Cooper What? Just because it favors Christianity means it can't be 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! No! Don't look at it that way. Most Americans and Europeans are not Christians because they do not trust and obey Christ. The true Christians are spread 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 great number of well educated and reputable Bible scholars who view the Bible as reliable history.

Barb How do these scholars explain the Crusades, Inquisition, and witch trials?

Cooper Can't you come up with anything within the last three hundred years?

Barb Ha, ha.

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 didn't have anything 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 other religions 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 way 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 potential, 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, as well as a couple of groans.

Karl That's eleven Yes's and three No's. 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 any reason for that.

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 just because of some pet peeve. You swore to follow those. Don't quit now.

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 in depth, 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 I insist we 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 meekly raised her hand. Her name was Lynn.

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 What a coincidence. 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."

"Great. 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. "Say David, 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 read it in a magazine article."

"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 think about it, what if it isn't just me searching? What if there is someone looking for me, someone with powers vastly superior to mine? My chances of being rescued just shot up a thousand-fold, maybe a million-fold. It sent tingles up my spine. I don't know if that searcher even exists, but wouldn't it be great if he did and was headed toward me at this moment?"

Karl looked confused. "I don't get it. If God is that powerful, how is it he doesn't know where we are? What's he waiting for?"

"Of course God knows our address. Our lost condition isn't a physical one. It's a condition of our soul. Isn't that what most religions are trying to correct?"

"So the reason God is far off is because there's something wrong between us and him?"

David threw his hands up. "Maybe. But if there is something wrong between us, what I'd really like to know is whether he is trying to fix it, and how hard he's trying. Now if you'll excuse me, I want to get to bed. There's a book I need to buy in the morning."

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 standing right over there."

"Cut it out."

"David, tell me about your dad. Have you talked to him about the search?"

"Not yet, although now he'd be happy with how 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 became a Christian?"

"He did indeed."

"What made him do that?"

"It was right after my mother died. I can see how something that traumatic could get a person thinking about religion. It took me ten years, but now I'm starting to understand."

"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 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 exactly what I was thinking. Maybe my dad's felt that for me. You've got to understand, Anna, I've heard a lot of bad press about Christianity, although I can't say that a Christian has ever been really unkind 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 a lot of 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."

"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 I have never set foot in a church in my whole life?"

"You're joking, 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, "I just realized something. 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. I don't know. I just wanted to use it."

"Maybe you trusted your dad."

"Could be. You know, Anna, I should invite him to visit. I know 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 up. What I say next is for the covenant members only. You agreed to wear your necklace until you found eternal life. See that wooden post over by the pillars, with the peg sticking out one side? If and 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'm a Christian, but I'm not too sure about the whole heaven thing."

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 since it was his turn to read.



Objections to Christianity

Owen There isn't a story this time. Just the title and 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 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 will participate plus a few volunteers from the crowd.

Besides the regulars, Jason, Chong, 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 go away. Wait, I thought of another reason. We don't like hell because we assume it's unfair, but maybe it is fair.

Anna I'll tell you why it's unfair because—

David I'm very sorry to cut you off, but only one person can give an opinion on each point.

Owen You're next, Jason. Fear of the supernatural.

Jason Personally, I don't relate to that fear. Christianity is big on the supernatural. God is supernatural and so is being raised from the dead. Therefore, it makes sense to get over it. Sorry, I can't tell you how.

Owen Phebe, you're next. I don't like what the Bible teaches.

Phebe I'd like to pass on that one.

Owen Then try this one. 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 I've got an answer, but I don't like it. It's not up to me; it's up to God.

Owen Karl next. Going back to the one she passed on. I don't like what the Bible teaches.

Karl That's easy. It's not up to me.

David No copying from your neighbor.

Karl Okay, okay. How about this? After studying the Bible for a while, I might see it in a different light. In other words, don't go with your first impression; go with your lasting impression.

David Not bad, Karl.

Owen Tyler. The maze of denominations, doctrines, and practices.

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 would have to, um, accept what it says.

Owen You're next, Chong. The maze of denominations, doctrines and practices.

Chong I will have to pass.

Owen Distasteful or strange Bible stories.

Chong May I please get some help from the crowd?

David Sorry, Chong. As you are seeing, one purpose of this exercise is to force people to consider the other side of an argument.

Chong Hold on, I think I have something. Bible stories can seem strange only because of cultural differences. After all, it was an Asian culture and long ago.

David Good job.

Owen Mary. Mary. The maze of denominations, doctrines, and practices.

Mary One's first impression is that this jumbled mess can't be a religion from God. Most of that stuff 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. Busy with cares and worries of life.

Elliot I don't understand how that would keep someone from Christianity. I'll have to pass.

Owen Next one. Nobody tells me what to do.

Elliot Is this rigged? 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 have to do it.

Owen Thanks for the clarification. Jose. Busy with cares and worries of life.

Jose You can't take it with you. Everybody knows the cliché, but they still work as if they *can* take it with them. Not me. I could be home working on my car right now, but instead I'm here.

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 next 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, but that's why I'm here, fighting off mosquitoes in some guy's backyard. Apparently some people consider it irrelevant. If a person thinks living forever is unimportant, I'm not sure what would change their mind.

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.

Owen Four to go. You're next, Latisha. Loyalty to another cause.

Latisha I guess the Christian faith is kind of demanding on our devotion. Everyone thinks the guy who wants two girlfriends is a jerk. Why would religion be different?

Owen Cooper. The need for endurance.

Cooper Christianity requires a commitment all the way to the end. It's not how you start the race; it's how you finish.

Owen David. Awful things happen in this world.

David I've always thought it unfair when people blame the President for the economy. Why blame God when bad things happen?

Owen And the last one is for me. Addiction to money, approval, or pleasure.

Owen Addictions can be hard to break. I know from experience. I guess it's saying we need to be willing to give up at least a few of them.



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. Anger, stubbornness, desires, pride—these could keep a person from eternal life.

Paul In other words, the problem is us.

David I have two kinds of students. The one who wants the right answer goes home and studies. The one who doesn't, 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, "Let's see, 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

Right before the meeting, David looked over the crowd, and to his amazement saw his cousin Joseph sitting in the back row. He had sunglasses on and seemed like he didn't want to be noticed, 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 simple maps at their disposal, as well as their combined 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 very few 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 fate would not permit them to perish. "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 trick they could think of, they probed what appeared to be the entrance of several 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 straight 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 farther from shore. With each possibility of safe landing, he turned it down 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 up, men. My navigator and I believe there is a four-out-of-five chance that this bay is our way of escape. However, you must remember that this decision 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 the bailing before we sink. 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 into 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 would like 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 are 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 couldn't be gullible.

Cooper That's true, but are you implying the 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 exactly what the rest of us need to find 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 too.
- Mary Very soon we will be pondering some unbelievable events in the Bible. This story suggests we should not demand absolute certainty about whether they are true. Is four out of five good enough? What's reasonable?
- Paul Fifty-one percent.
- Tyler I'm not going to become a Christian because I'm fifty-one percent certain 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 were fifty-one percent sure the left-hand trail led 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 out over a lifetime.
- 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 just a little less than I'd prefer. Sounds a little suspicious.
- Jose I agree.
- Paul That's what the fourth captain thought. Four out of five isn't bad, but he'd really like nine out of ten. If he gets nine out of ten, he holds out for ten out of eleven. We never get to choose how much evidence we're given. The crucial question is not whether you are getting the proof you would *like*, but what's your verdict based on the proof you *have*. The person inclined to doubt simply sets their threshold of proof just beyond what's given, but this story shows the disastrous results this produces.
- 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 This may come as a surprise, but you may not get your own private miracle from God. We're in no position to be choosy. In a storm, take any port you can get.
- Mary I can see why the book put this story here. It'd be very easy to set the level of proof required 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. I can't take the H out of H₂O and still call it water.
- Latisha I might have a problem with being gullible.
- David Thanks for being honest, 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 some amazing insights."

"I'm familiar with that author. Did you know that his ideas contradict Christian teaching?"

Latisha said, "I hadn't noticed. I like what he says. It complements Jesus' words nicely. It's helped me have a better attitude toward difficult people, and that's a good thing. The author talks about God all the time."

"False religions and false teachers talk about God all the time."

"Doesn't Jesus want me to pick up wisdom wherever I can find it?"

Sandra warned, "Jesus is a jealous lover who insists on loyalty to him and his teaching alone. He won't share you with anyone else."

Friday



Enemies of the Faith

There once were two soldiers who escaped from prison deep behind enemy lines. They were anxious to make their way to the front and leave enemy

territory. One of the soldiers, Amos, knew from reliable information obtained in prison that they should head north. The other soldier, Clark, initially trusted his friend Amos. Soon after their getaway, they came across a third soldier named 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 country has some who are loyal to our side. They would be glad to assist us. But there are also some who would be pleased to direct us right back into the arms of our adversaries. Therefore you must be very careful what advice you take. Never forget that you are behind enemy lines.

"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 maintaining their existence 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. 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 very kind and pleasant fellow, who seemed genuinely interested in my welfare. He said going west 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 and do so 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 tonight 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 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 willing 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 The context is Christianity and its truthfulness. It's not a physical war, but a battle of information, of lies versus truth.
- Paul As for the lions, thousands of Christians are suffering today in other parts of the world, only because of loyalty to their faith. Millions of Christians died because of their beliefs in the last

century alone, 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 Of course, there are 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 tearing down a religion that turns out to be the way to escape death, then in some ways they *are* my mortal enemy.

Karl You must admit, Christianity can be divisive. Some people 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 The Christian faith does have a few people who actively campaign against it. If you don't want to call them enemies, fine. I don't think that was the story's primary message. What was 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 without checking it out.

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 Imagine you pick up a book that states, "Recent archeological discoveries prove that the walls of Jericho did not fall down as described in the Bible."

Jose That's easy. Rule number one: If you read anything that discredits the Bible, automatically assume it's true.

Cooper What?

Jose Just kidding. I loved that look on your face.

Karl We don't know anything about this author. So we take his or her statement with a grain of salt and withhold judgment.

Latisha Why would they lie? Books like that are written by professionals.

David Whether they are lying or deceived, we will never know. But the fact that professionals can be wrong is beyond dispute because there are many professionals on both sides of the 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 whole without question.

Elliot What if everything you hear keeps reinforcing the same positions 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 fool yourself right out of eternal life simply by what you choose to listen to.

Geoff Did you notice who gave Clark wrong advice? First there was someone knowledgeable, a professional. Then there was someone charming, and finally someone who appeared to be on his side.

Latisha To top it off, there was the fellow prisoner, Prescott. We don't know if he was a double agent or just deceived.

Paul Those who lead you astray can be wolves, or shepherds in sheep's clothing.

David You mean a pastor or priest? That's a little scary.

Paul The cause of Christianity has been hindered by enemies and phonies in its midst, far more than by outsiders who openly declare their hostility.

Mary Maybe there's a Judas here right now.

David added "Enemies of the Faith" to the Christian Attitudes pillar.

Anna sat next to Tyler and commented to him, "You were quiet this evening."

"I just felt like listening tonight."

As people were leaving, David shouted, "We will be doing door-to-door again this Sunday. For those who haven't tried it, I can tell you it's an eye opening experience, and no one has thrown rocks at us 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 could bring my chair, but I'm not sure how to get across your lawn."

"No problem. By Monday I'll have some plywood laid down."

"I don't want to be too much—"

"Consider it done. Is someone helping you to the car?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Hank was standing by. When she left, David said to him, "We've got to get going. 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 eight with my pickup."

"What for?"

"To 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 probably 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, "Are you going to confess it to your new bride as well?"

"Um, I don't think I'll mention it to her."

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 such short notice," Tyler said. "I'm afraid I have bad news. The group at David Ruben's house voted to study Christianity. I even got myself qualified to vote, but it wasn't enough. After the vote, one woman stormed out of the meeting in protest. It was some scene."

"Yes, I heard about that. Don't be alarmed, young man. Most people who pick up the Bible have no intention of practicing it."

"This group is different, at least some of them. They intend to treat the Bible like any other book."

"I see," said Peterson. "Zealots. We'd rather have them lukewarm. That is a concern, but you've come to the right place. I've watered down many Christians. Here is rule number one: If you read anything that discredits the Bible, automatically assume it's true. Another rule: When talking about the Bible, always precede it with a qualifier. For example, 'Jesus was supposedly born in Bethlehem,' or 'It is believed that Abraham started the Jewish nation.'"

"Do I talk like that when discussing secular history, to avoid suspicion?"

"No. You'd sound strange and lose credibility. No historian says 'Alexander the Great, allegedly from Macedonia.' Now, remember last time how I encouraged you to use the argument from silence? This works well with the Bible since most of its stories are not repeated by other historians, which proves they probably didn't take place."

"I'm not following you."

"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 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 is always 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."

"How would that help?"

"The Bible is filled with miracles, impressive ones. Some people decide ahead of time that miracles are impossible. As soon as they read one, they

reject the whole book, and your job is done. Another ploy is to draw attention to men who badly bungle the defense of Christianity."

"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. They only work on the simple-minded. I think that's all you can handle for now." Mr. Peterson escorted Tyler onto his porch.

Tyler said, "You might not believe this, but my younger brother is very spiritual. He follows some guru from India. I can't remember the name. It's very long and they all sound alike. If I could get him to come over here, would you be willing to talk to him?"

"I wouldn't worry about him," Mr. Peterson said. "That kind of faith is harmless, the complete opposite of biblical Christianity. Now, if you don't mind, would you grant me the pleasure of telling me why you hate Christians, that is, the zealous ones?"

"Many reasons. They set themselves apart like they're God's special people. Reminds me of the Jews. They think they're better than us, but they're really hypocrites. They're always telling us we can't have any fun. They think they have to convert everyone, as if there's something wrong with us. Their book says people are evil. I resent being called evil."

"It must be hard being around them three times a week."

"These people aren't exactly like that, but they could end up that way."

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 craft projects."

David cringed. "Ouch!"

"I'm too laid back," Karl said. "I should send you over there."

"Sure. We can go now."

"Nice try. Let's start on Milwaukee Avenue instead."

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?"

"No way," the man said. "You can't treat the Bible like it's a history book. It's in a special category."

"Why is that?" asked Karl.

"Haven't you read it? Worldwide floods, seas parting, talking donkeys. Does that sound like a regular book to you? Aren't you Christians? You must think it's unique."

Karl replied, "I'm not a Christian. Sorry, but it's just another history book to me."

He looked at David. "What about you?"

"Me neither. I'm Jewish, so the Bible is my family history."

The man looked at Cooper. "Now I'm afraid to ask you. Did you three lose a bet? You can't be doing this because you enjoy it."

Next door, a woman perked up when she heard the question. "I've been reading about that lately."

"What have you found?"

"A lot of opinions."

David said, "Have you talked to anyone else? That's how we're doing it, and it makes a huge difference."

"I prefer books. It's less stressful, and there's no arguing."

They invited her to the meetings, but she wanted to keep looking on her own.

At another house, an older man answered, "I believe what the Bible says."

"Are you a Christian?"

"I guess you could say that."

"Where do you go to church?"

"I keep away from churches, do my own thing."

"That's interesting," David said. "Do you try to practice what the Bible teaches?"

"Just 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 warnings in the Bible?"

"We don't need to take them seriously. God is loving. It's not like he's some jealous husband."

Cooper added, "Actually, that is how the Bible presents God."

"I never liked those parts. They were probably added by someone after it was written."

After that house, David, Karl, and Cooper walked down the sidewalk and saw two young men coming toward them. They were clean-cut, dressed in ties and dark suits, and carrying Bibles. The two young men gave them big smiles as they passed. When they were out of earshot, Cooper said, "We should have stopped and debated those two. We can take 'em, I tell you. We can take 'em. Look at 'em. They just started shaving last week." David grinned at Karl and rolled his eyes.

In the last house of the day, a man said, "It's funny you should ask about that. My wife has been trying to get me to church lately. I've got too many objections to Christianity."

"Such as?"

"Hypocrites, hell, denominations, and all the fun things I don't want to give up."

David suggested, "If there were answers to each one of those, would you change your mind?"

"I guess, 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 a minute. Are you the guys in the newspaper?"

Karl said, "That could be us."

"Cool. If you guys are willing to take your Sunday afternoon to do this, I guess I could take an hour to try your suggestion."

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 off each stone, someone yell out the story in a few words. The first one is 'Will to Live.'"

Someone responded, "Young soldier escaping prison." As David gave each title, someone summarized the story in a few words.

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 fixing his watch
Incomplete Paths	Starving villagers go to the big city
Anti-religious Bias	Teenage orphans
Anti-supernatural Bias	Ken and his 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 finally 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."

"Take it away, narrator," David said.



Textual Accuracy

One year, at the 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 child 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 one month. Once the tenth team member is done for the last 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 two weeks 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 their language. At the end, the tenth copy from each foreign team was translated back into English for the treasure hunter. After four days, 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 with what was available. The judges agreed. To no one's surprise, the medallion was easily found that same day. 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 all 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 an absolute 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 have been doing our own research, so don't try to slip anything past us.

Blake had spent the past couple weeks observing from the back row. He had knowledge of the Bible's background and decided now was the time to use it.

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. But most importantly, the foundational truths of God's message are repeated not eight times, but eight hundred-and-eighty-eight 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 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, all is not lost.

- 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 all over the Mediterranean World, and remember that Christians and Jews maintained separate copies of the Old Testament. The second type, the foreigners, 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.
- Blake Here is the deal clincher: notice how the story said that the teams could not compare each other's work. Once the branches of copies, translations, quotes, and artifacts are created, they remain independent. An error introduced into one branch will not be duplicated in another, let alone all branches. So in our day, we read the end result of these branches, and what do we see? They all agree, which guarantees the copying process was essentially error free.
- Liz You're joking, right? 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 Exactly when did these branches start?
- Paul For the New Testament, two thousand years ago. For the Old Testament, about 2,500 years ago.
- Anna Are you sure that corruptions in one branch couldn't infect another?
- Geoff Imagine a Jew living in Egypt in 150 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 world and convincing them to change their copies of the Holy Scriptures, not to mention every translation and every place this story is referenced in a letter, sermon or commentary? He also has to get every church in the world to add his *improvement* to their sacred books and destroy all previous copies.
- Anna Good point.
- Jose I know for a fact there are thousands of differences in the 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 a random word with one on the next page. Circle half a dozen random sentences throughout the Bible and a few paragraphs, indicating those as uncertain. If you did that with the two hundred pages which comprise the tenth generation copies in the medallion story, you'd have over two hundred errors associated with just an eight page document. It sounds like a lot, but here's what matters. Would they still find the medallion?
- Karl In a heartbeat. So 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 never raising the dead, 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 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 don'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 some more homework.
- Paul That would be good, but I can absolutely guarantee you won't find different versions. They don't exist. The worst differences between

copies are just as that gentleman described, a corrupted word once in a while, and a handful 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 a month to do the copying.

Liz But why do so many people say the Bible's been changed, if there is no 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?

Latisha We'll see about that.

Tyler I'm willing to concede that the branch theory works for the last two thousand years or so. However, before five hundred B.C., when the alleged Babylonian exile took place, the situation was very different. The Jews were confined to their own country, so there were no copies all over the world and no translations. Therefore, it is much more possible that a creative scholar added stories to the Bible, such as the alleged exodus from Egypt.

Karl Why do you keep saying alleged?

Owen That is true. For the first thousand years, the Old Testament was maintained only by the Jewish nation. Are you suggesting the Jewish copiers were making changes during that time?

Tyler Yes.

David Produce your proof.

Tyler This has been common knowledge for the past two hundred years. (Everyone stared at Tyler.)

Tyler All right, you want actual proof. It had to have been changed because of all the miracle stories, since we know those couldn't have happened. (Everyone kept staring at Tyler.)

- Tyler Fine, call that bias. We don't have accounts of the biblical stories from any real histories, so that proves they didn't happen. (More staring.)
- Tyler You guys are too picky. When you look very closely at the Old Testament it shows evidence of having been tampered with.
- 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 Regrettably, they don't exist anymore.
- David How fortunate for your theory. I guess 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. Anyone here want to do that? What evidence do they see to prove the Jews were manipulating their sacred scriptures?
- Tyler Things like changes in emphasis, word usage, or tone of voice.
- David That's it? For the past 2,500 years, the Jewish scriptures have not changed, other than a few 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 2,500 years of evidence and believe that my people treated their holy books in an entirely different manner for their first one thousand years, 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 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.
- David prepared a stone with the words "Textual Accuracy."
- Mary What happens if we vote against this one?
- Sandra I presume we set aside the book and study this topic in depth.
- David That's right. We will vote on this one question and only this 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 called Christian Proofs.

As people were leaving, Paul and Sandra talked 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 offered, "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 value being taught the Bible from the start."

"My folks' faith has always been genuine."

"What church do you go to now?"

Cooper said, "I stopped going to church last year. I decided it's too hard to find one that's good enough."

"We sure appreciate your support in the discussions."

"I know all 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 the conversation.

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 to use as they pleased, and its 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 Vasek called together the leading members of his relatives to contest the size of the estate he had inherited. Praz, who spoke for the relatives, explained to Vasek the decrees laid out in the five brothers' wills. Vasek appeared to have no case.

Vasek stated, "I read these wills, but I am prepared to contest their authority."

"On what basis?" asked Praz.

"On the basis that they may not be the true wills. How do we know our fathers 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 an account that did not happen?"

"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?"

"It could have happened," Vasek said, "Everyone knows we have stories today about the five brothers besides what is contained in the wills."

"Yes, everyone has heard of those stories, myths really."

"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?"

Vasek said nothing.

"Answer us!" Praz 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 accounts, 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 with independent sources that we have been continually using the same testaments for three hundred years, and that these other stories came into existence at least one hundred years later. Thirdly, if even a child reads the wills alongside these myths, it will be obvious that the former are genuine and the latter are the invention of story-tellers."

Vasek tried another tactic. "Only a generation ago, our fathers published an official pronouncement validating these wills as genuine. The fact that they did this proves the identity of the correct wills was in doubt."

"That official pronouncement was only to quiet troublemakers like you. The rest of us already accepted the wills without this stamp of approval because their validity is obvious."

"But how do we know they validated the right ones, since this was done centuries later?"

"Selecting the right wills was trivial because they trusted the five brothers and every generation since 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."

"You did admit there are others who doubt whether the correct documents were preserved."

"We concede that there are other doubters," Praz said. "But like you they fail to bring even 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 there, and they simply picked books that accurately depicted what they knew to be true.

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 events

happened. This ended about four hundred B.C. The New Testament books were chosen by Christians in the first century. It's interesting that the early Christians agreed with the Jewish nation's choice of Old Testament books.

Karl Vasek kept making accusations, but the other guy would say there is no evidence to support them. Is that true?

Blake, who had spoken up at the last meeting, made use of his biblical knowledge again.

Blake It is true. The same doubts raised by Vasek are the kind 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, so they introduce doubt.

Anna Is it true there's no evidence that the wrong books were picked?

David I've been reading a lot about this and have yet to find any credible evidence.

Elliot There are other gospels, epistles, and so on.

Geoff Yes, but they don't contradict the New Testament; they only add stories and sayings. It isn't like there are ten different versions of the life of Jesus. There is only one.

Elliot Everyone knows it took centuries to pick the books in the Bible.

Blake You will not be able to produce any proof of this, anymore than Vasek 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. 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 was distributed all over the Roman world. The books were endorsed by their being used in many churches.

Tyler Everyone knows there was a lot of politics in the church during the Middle Ages. That could have influenced the selecting of the books.

Blake The politics was much later. You're off by several centuries.

Hank That's close enough for Tyler.

- Anna The story implied that it could be proven historically that the church used the same books from the beginning.
- Paul It is proven by thousands of quotes 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, they were written decades and centuries later. Of these, we have very few copies, and they weren't quoted or translated by the early Christians. All this shows that the early Christians considered them unimportant, or they didn't even exist yet.
- Jose What about the Old Testament? How many books are there that give other accounts of the history of the Jews?
- David None. The only records we have of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, and so on, 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. Doesn't that strike anyone else as a little suspicious?
- Anna No, it strikes me as normal. I would expect family members to write the family history. 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 must continually punish, including their priests and kings. Does that sound like something they'd make up?
- Tyler Maybe it was made up by just a few of them.
- Owen Tyler, this book contains the Jews' government, culture, history, religion and hopes. Are you suggesting an entire nation adopted as their heart and soul a fable that depicts them as villains?
- 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 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 have given up and decided that because of this, there could be no medallion?
- 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 I agree with Latisha, but I also think the boundaries between biblical and other books are very clear. Many things make them stand out, and this is why Christians, and Jews for the Old Testament, have always been in remarkable agreement on this topic.
- 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 fell right into that one. Are you accusing them of ulterior motives, like Vasek?
- 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 big problem. We have to trust the Jews and early Christians, trust that they made the right choice. What if they made a mistake? That was a long time ago. Am I willing to change my whole life because of it?
- 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 both Jews and Christians 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 at least fifty-one percent sure that they picked the wrong books?
- Elliot I'm not sure of anything.
- Latisha You're like that 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 ballots this time. I don't want anyone's vote affected just because they don't want to be seen as a Vasek.

When the ballots were collected, there were two no votes. David made a "Selecting the Books" stone.

After the meeting, Karl asked David, "What's with Cooper? I thought he was a Christian."

David said, "Something's bothering him lately. I can tell his heart's not in this anymore."

The day afterward, Karl paid a visit to his sister. She knew he was a good friend of David, so she asked, "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 your 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, so here's my answer. 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 is 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 Nomasa. 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 and demolish their village. Nomasa sent two trusted men, Din and Okafor, 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 Din lying dead on the ground. Further on lay Okafor 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 the village, and the parchments were given to the village Chief. He called the whole village together and read what the two men had written. Then the Chief posted the accounts so anyone could examine them.

First Account:

I, Din, was sent out by the Nomasa 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 all 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 cover of advancing darkness we continued quietly toward the camp, always keeping our lips sealed so as not to betray ourselves to roaming sentries. Okafor commented more than once how scared he was. Suddenly a lone man was before us. He fled up the hillside. Okafor gave chase, but I called to him to let the man go. He did not listen. I waited a while, then made some arrows with sticks showing the direction I was going, toward the camp. From a small rise I had a very good view of the enemy encampment. At that point I wished I had brought my black cloak to cover my white clothes, but some bush 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 only a temporary camp? 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. As they were marching directly toward us, 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 Nomasa, so we cautiously crawled ahead of them to remain undetected. Nearing the vilage, 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 helples vilage. As we scrambled down the hillside, the rage in me kept building as we drew closer to bloodthirsty savages. In the morning, their vicious intentions became certain as they moved straight towards the homes of our

wives, 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 a old man like me? I feared the man would report us and waited anxiously for Din 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 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 Din 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 look for 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 is passionate.

Cooper There are a few unanswered questions like, why didn't Din think they had to chase the man, and what about the building he saw in the valley.

Karl Anything else . . . ? Okay. Let's resume the story.



Story continued . . .

The village Chief said to those gathered, "As you know, the Witu are our sworn enemies. 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, if not sooner. We have only forty warriors among us so 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 Nomasa villagers. Would you pack a few essentials and flee to the mountain caves for an indefinite number of days? The Nomasa villagers have been enemies of the Witu for generations, so there is no reason for them 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 hands.

Karl How many would flee?

Everyone else raised their hands, about fifty people.

Karl One of you who voted to stay in the village, tell us why.

Voter I think there's a gimmick to this story, 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 accounts and talking to a few men 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, but quickly."

Kanja said, "You are fleeing to the mountains only because of what is written in these accounts, but have you read them closely? Can we trust what is written there? Personally, I have serious doubts about their accuracy

because I find them 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 Din 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 Din 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. There are all kinds of differences between these two men's stories. Makes one wonder if they were describing the same event. Why doesn't Okafor mention the building, and why doesn't Din mention the bloodletting? Notice how Din says they went back up the valley to sleep for the night, but Okafor says they kept an eye on their enemies all night. Lastly, you have Din saying they closed in on the camp in late afternoon, and Okafor 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 not a simple 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 other villages haven't seen them? That part about dripping their blood in the fire, do you really believe that? No one ever heard of such a practice. How many huts of shields were there? Din says he saw them all around the camp, but Okafor says, and I quote, 'a single pyramid.' But I'm not the only one who sees what you don't. Ask your own tribesman."

One of the Nomasa tribesman said, "He's right. Din says they were always keeping their lips sealed and in the next sentence says Okafor talked about being scared. Does that sound like always to you? Din says there were two thousand men and Okafor saw ten thousand fires. Did each man light five fires? Din 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 was it two thousand men or two thousand arrows? In the morning Din says they hurried up the valley and then says they cautiously crawled. I'd like to see someone hurrying while they crawl. Din's credibility is worthless. As for

Okafor, would you trust someone who won't put his name on his account, and who is in serious need of spelling and grammar lessons?"

"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 decided on a hoax, but bungled it because they filled their accounts with these supposed contradictions?"

Kanja replied calmly, "We aren't saying these men deliberately lied. Maybe their memories played a few 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 Okafor mention any weapons as Din does? Why didn't both give more military descriptions? Instead, we have useless details about arrows made of sticks and Din going on and on about his cloak. Did you notice how Okafor's account ended abruptly? Makes you wonder what happened to the rest of his story."

A second tribesman spoke up. "I've noticed a few things too. Din says emphatically there were two thousand men. You expect me to believe there were exactly two thousand, and did he count them while fleeing? Din says a hut had two dozen shields and Okafor said it had a few. Only someone wanting 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? We don't know how to interpret this, so why put our faith in a story with so many ambiguities? Din 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 neither man mentioned, but of course Din 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 the light. I've been studying these myths, and I'm fascinated by the two versions of Okafor'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 added later by an editor. The change in writing styles is obvious: Okafor is filled with anger, but the writer of what I'm calling *Second Okafor* is timid. Din 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. The morning portion was obviously 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. Further research may turn up a third author."

"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 their *word choice*."

"Actually, these men's accounts inspire me."

"So you're coming with us after all?"

"No need to. I've decided 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 couldn't possibly explain all of them."

The chief turned to a different man. "What about you?"

He said, "I don't care about that nonsense. I'm not running from an army I've never seen."

"Do you believe Din's and Okafor'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're 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'll take my chances."

"Then please allow your wife and children to come with us."

The man paused and thought for a minute. "Fine, they can go with you."

The Chief led part of the village 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 fresh 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 it progressed.

Owen At the beginning none of us thought anything was wrong with the accounts. But after hearing the sheer weight of their words, it almost started to sound logical.

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 about believing the parts that supported their objections? They readily believed Din 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.

Cooper Not true! Someone did mention that there were two names for the valley. It is clear nothing you say from now on can be trusted.

- Anna Oh yeah? 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 someone else.
- Cooper This conversation can't be happening because it is filled with con-
tradi—
- David Thank you for the role playing. I think the point's been made.
- Geoff As the objections went along, they sounded more and more like some biblical scholars I've heard. That's scary.
- Mary I'm a little naive about this. Do people do that with the Bible?
- Cooper Some have written whole books using the Kanja method of dis-
crediting the Bible.
- Mary Why?
- Jose Go ahead and say it, Sandra.
- Sandra We're in enemy territory.
- Mary But why do they do it? 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 dream up these things, but there are far more Nomasa villagers who hear them and are led astray. Maybe there are some here tonight.
- Hank You won't be hearing from them. They're pouting because this story defused the bombs they were going to toss at the Bible.
- David It's getting late. We'll finish 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 hearers. Okafor grew up in a different region, and where he came from, they called the Langa valley the Butam. It never occurred to Okafor to use the Nomasa name for the valley. The reason Din didn't feel a need to chase the man they surprised was that he knew from his garments that he wasn't Witu. The building Din saw used to be surrounded

by trees, which is why he hadn't noticed it before. The Witu cut down the trees for firewood. Okafor had previously seen the building, 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. We're a boring family. They're spread all over the country. I'm the only one close to home. It's nice because I can visit my parents more often."

"Did your family go to church when you were young?"

"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 totally off the deep end and tried to convert me."

"What did you do?"

"It was spring semester, 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, I have. 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. I hope you understand."

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 fifty beats and I wouldn't hear birds and angels singing."

Now Anna was really blushing. "I thought you didn't believe in angels."

"I don't, but I still hear them singing when a certain person sits next to me."

Anna changed the subject. "Has it been hard talking about Christianity? I know it's not your favorite topic."

"I hate it," David groaned.

"Really? You don't show hostility, not like some of those guys."

"I'm trying very hard to be fair and open-minded. I have to be honest. The Christian faith appears better than anything else we've looked at."

Anna confessed, "I don't think I have your integrity. Even if turns out to be the one, I don't know if I can make the leap."

"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 staying away from Christianity reunite you with him?"

"It's getting late. Time to head home."

As they walked to the car, Anna said, "Have you noticed that guy crawling through the woods behind your yard?"

"Yup. I'm thinking of leaving a snack out for him."

Monday

The crowd grew each week as word spread around town. 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 story about the Nomasa village. Who wants to summarize the story's main point?"

Geoff When reading the Bible, don't go wacko on us.

Elliot Would you mind defining *wacko*?

Geoff Read and understand the Bible like any other book.

Liz I thought the whole 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 In other words, we have no right to invent special methods for understanding the Bible. We must assume it uses the same rules of communication that we use in everyday life.

Cooper Why should we assume that? Isn't the Bible a special book?

David Where would you get the special rules from?

Anna Can someone give an example? I'm having a little 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 or an error, that doesn't disqualify everything else they say. Two people explaining the same event usually give different descriptions. Don't try to read the author's mind too much. *Always*

rarely means always. Mathematical precision is not expected in most forms of communication. Don't read too much into silence. Don't fixate on one word or non-essential details. The Nomasa objectors did all this and more.

David Well done, Jose.

Elliot But this is beside the point. The Bible has genuine contradictions.

Owen Like what?

Elliot One place will say there was one of something and another place says there were two. It sometimes uses two names for the same person. Some of the chronologies don't add up. Other times it describes things that don't make any sense.

Latisha Those are exactly like the discrepancies Kanja brought up.

Sandra This story has raised our awareness, and now each of us must come to our own conclusion on the Bible. But please be careful, or you could end up like those who stayed in the village.

Mary Some of the objections in the story had to do with multiple authors. Do people really accuse the Bible of that?

Cooper You bet they do.

Paul Scholars look for changes in word usage, shifts in tone, or a portion restated in detail, and then build up a theory around them. When they revisit the text, not surprisingly it matches their theory. Since this is done by educated professionals, it sounds convincing and many have swallowed it whole, but its only purpose is to cast doubt on the Bible.

David Hmm. Maybe we are in enemy territory. Karl says there is a little more of the Nomasa story in the book. Go ahead.



Discrepancies continued . . .

Revisit the Nomasa story but with this change. The Witu tribe acquired guns from Europeans. The Nomasa village is remote and has never had contact with the outside world. They know nothing about the existence of firearms. Din's and Okafor'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

made 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 accounts.
- 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 fair?
- Geoff I would think not.
- Paul Here's the point I think 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 if you're motivated to look for them. 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 circular 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'd 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 get the chance to make that choice soon.
- Karl There is one more portion of the story.



Discrepancies continued . . .

Return one more time to the Nomasa story, the original version without the guns, but with this change. Din and Okafor 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 be judged with different rules now?



Latisha In other words, if Din's and Okafor's accounts were added to the Bible, would they now have errors?

Liz That's easy. The answer is no, because they didn't have errors before.

Mary What do you mean?

Liz If there was nothing wrong with them before, then there is 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 kind of 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 just invented your own special rules for 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 things like word choice, rounding off numbers, figurative language, and what details to include.
- Sandra The purpose of their reports was to relate that an enemy army was coming, and this they did 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 And there are hundreds of interpretations by Christian denominations.
- David Good 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 all agree with you.
- Sandra Yes, 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 There are parts that are confusing to me.
- This was only the third meeting for Jada, but she worked up the courage 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 their dry climate and sandy soil, if the bushes didn't get regular watering, they would surely 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 some of them seemed unclear.

Latisha What part of "Love your neighbor as yourself" isn't clear?

Owen Of course, we aren't expected to keep all 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 out of it.

Jada I've got another story for that.

David Be our guest.

Jada A pilot made an emergency landing at a remote place in the frozen Arctic. 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 any of the silly games we do with the Bible, such as reading meaning into words or focusing on a few sentences and ignoring the rest. He won't search for hidden truths and neither will he repeatedly chant from the manual thinking it has magical powers. He won't build a doctrine on a few sentences which denies the plain meaning of all the rest. He won't devote all his time to singing it, memorizing it, or learning its original language. Instead he will study it and do 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?

Jose You want to find out what God is like? Find out where he's talking.

David took a new marble stone and put "Discrepancies" on it.

David A yes vote means you agree with this statement: I will fairly and impartially read 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. He was the one who convinced me to move here from New York and take a job at Vanberth. I was very surprised to see him. It would cause a big uproar in my family for any of my relatives to convert."

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 in to 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. You know David was never interested in talking about our Lord. I tried more than once to point him to Jesus the savior, 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've got an idea through my spy."

"Your what?"

"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 finagle that?"

"It wasn't me. This person decided to send me a few letters, to keep 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 are very general, 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 the Messiah."

"How long are you going to wait before doing something? 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 too 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 pocket. I'm ready to go.

"When do you think that will be?"

"I've wanted to go every day for weeks, but the Holy Spirit makes it very clear in my heart that it's not the right time yet. When he says 'Go,' I'll go."

Wednesday

It was Jose's turn to read the story, 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 very little contact with the rest of the world. Their nation consisted of one large city and a few dozen small villages. A governor and his public servants ruled the land from the main 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 properly administered without the governor's interference, and we have come to declare our independence."

The governor's assistant told them, "What you propose is sedition!"

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 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 packed. 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 founded 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 us or any other 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 our countrymen learned that the Tulars were 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. Also, the Tulars wished to prevent civilian casualties and often restrained their armies, something the dictator didn't worry about. In spite of this, victory was inevitable for the Tulars, and they finally defeated the dictator and removed him from power.

"Because the Tular people are benevolent, they made our land a protectorate; otherwise, a neighboring dictator would have quickly enslaved us. Because they had worked with certain families in the underground for generations, the Tulars knew who was loyal and could be trusted to act with justice and goodness. 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, insuring good rulers from generation to generation. The first governor began to rule two hundred years ago, and his successors have reigned 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 our current regime came to power. 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 they left us. 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 propose that the events leading to the establishment of our government did not occur as commonly believed. 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, which I spoke of in my opening remarks."

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 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 find 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 off of previously written material."

"People do forget things."

"Not major events like these. In addition, many events and speeches in this book are described by more than one author. How is it that all their forgetful accounts 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 if you look very closely, their accounts differ in some details concerning names, numbers, and dates."

"You admit all the witnesses agree on the major events, the same events you claim didn't happen. In fact, you would expect two people describing the same thing to differ in the minor details. All you have done is strengthened my case by proving that my witnesses were independent and didn't copy each other's work."

The defense attorney 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've never seen them. The jury will decide whom 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 of one million?"

"Who ever heard of it? We all have. It's in our National History."

"You can't use that book for evidence. It's biased. You need a real history."

The judge stepped in with an explanation. "These are the prosecutor's witnesses, and their testimony is considered true unless proven otherwise. Merely declaring that you don't believe them is not adequate."

The defense attorney continued, "I maintain the evidence is biased because your witnesses are all contained in only 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 there aren't any witnesses from other countries. These were dramatic events. Why didn't other people write about them?"

"The histories of other nations do briefly mention these events, but our fathers who lived through it wrote about them in the greatest detail. We are waiting for an argument to discredit the witnesses I've brought forward. Is this it, that there should be even more witnesses?"

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 peoples were simple-minded, undependable, and prone to inventing stories."

The prosecutor replied, "And your proof for this is . . . ?"

"All the myths and superstitions the ancients created."

"The bookstore down the street is filled with stories of monsters, ghosts, and magic."

"That has nothing to do with this. 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 attorney turned to face 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 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. The names of its heroes are found in our neighbor's histories. 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."

"The authors made it appear historical, but did they really intend it to be understood as literal history?"

"Our history contains frequent accounts of people losing their lives because they did exactly what you propose, dismissing the message of this book as a fable. You may repeat their mistake, but be assured that the authors of this book meant for their warnings to be taken as deadly serious."

"I still think it's nothing more than myths."

The judge addressed the defense attorney with mounting impatience. "To simply point a finger at the prosecution's witnesses and say that they made it all up has never been acceptable in any court of law."

After consulting his four defendants, the defense attorney 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 possible, since they lived in different generations. The time between the first Tular contact and the liberation was two hundred years, during which period our history was continuously being written."

"What about the thousands of others who lived during those times? We don't know what they believed."

"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 twenty 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?"

"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."

"Not so fast," replied the defense attorney, "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, so I will let the jury decide who to trust. Granted, the authorship of the other half is unknown, but that is of no consequence. 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, those forty thousand people I mentioned."

"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 currently used 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 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 a completely different people."

The defense attorney glanced at the judge and decided to move on.

Pacing in front of the jury, the defense attorney addressed 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 were sure, as if they had eyewitness accounts at their disposal, their own or others."

"If they weren't eyewitnesses, we can't trust them."

"One of our contemporary authors recently published a new biography about Governor Walkenship, who lived a hundred years ago. Do you think that book is historically unreliable simply 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 entirely possible that the authors wrote these things a couple 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 later generations. 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."

"Are you sure it's not that hard?"

"It happens more than you think."

"If it's that easy, would you demonstrate by role playing for the jury?"

"Well, that's different, and I don't think the judge would allow it."

The judge said, "I don't see any difference. I will allow it. See if you can convince them."

The defense attorney looked toward the jury, who were all staring right back at him.

He was allowed a few minutes to prepare. Meanwhile, the judge instructed the jury that they could also role play. The defense attorney began. "Listen, all 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 even wrote it down in this book and made copies for everyone."

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 accept our National History's version except for these changes: the Tulars had a much smaller role in our liberation, and we set up our own representative form of government without their oversight." The judge consented.

"Listen, people, to this true story about our fascinating past. Fifty, uh eighty years ago, our nation had a revolution. It is commonly believed that a representative form of government was set up, and the Tulars only sold us a few arms to help out. Here is what really happened. The Tulars, who have amazing powers, played a much bigger role than you previously 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 even wrote it down in this book and made copies for everyone."

A juror replied, "We already have a written history containing what really took place. We hold it in great reverence, as if it's the word of God. Are you asking us to casually replace it with your new and 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 books all over the country, so this switch is invisible to later generations."

The judge spoke to the defense attorney, "I try not to give advice to counsel, 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 story-tellers and hearers knew these things were fictional but did it for the good of later generations, to teach a moral lesson."

The prosecutor quipped, "What lesson would that be? Let's build our country on a colossal lie?"

"Doesn't this history seem like something our fathers fabricated?"

"On the contrary, it has the clear ring of truth. Have you read how many of our fathers turned traitor on the Tulars, resulting in shameful and violent deaths? Even the sins of the loyalists are readily discussed. The Tulars are the heroes. 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 National History our ancestors would likely invent."

"Maybe only some lied, and the rest thought it was true."

"This didn't happen in a corner, but played out in the heart of our country, in plain view of everybody, over a period of two hundred years."

"Okay, then they stretched the truth a little."

"You mean they lied."

"Some of it could have happened, but their lies filled in the blanks."

The prosecutor moved to the front of the jury box. "Which parts did they lie about? 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."

"Not the whole history."

"Then which parts?"

"Just the parts that I don't agree wi—Uh, I can't be sure because they're lying."

"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 or instability among the authors? You have yet to present even a shred of evidence to support your accusation of widespread deception."

"These stories are unbelievable. They must have been lying at some level."

The judge said, "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. However, it is impossible for him to prove that every person in every situation acted with integrity, since these events took place long ago. Therefore, 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. Even their family and friends praised her integrity. However, when she was out of her husband's sight a few hours each week, he was sure that she was unfaithful, despite the lack of evidence. When she returned home, this suspicious man would beat her. When she asked him why, he would say, 'Though you are well behaved most of the week, how can I be one hundred percent sure that you aren't doing something shameful when no one is watching?' This is the entire basis for the defense's argument. Whenever the testimony of my

witnesses can be tested, it is consistently trustworthy. When it cannot, the defense is ready to rush in and accuse my witnesses of blatant 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 warning. When the Tulars were here, they vowed to return one day. When they next appear, they promised to 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. Anyone who recants 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 prevents us from waiting until their coming and recanting 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 loyalty. One morning, their armies will appear on the top of the hills to the east. All those not in submission at that 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?" The judge dismissed the defendants and their attorney to a waiting room while the jury was in session.

One of the defendants, a deputy in charge of the police department, worked up the courage to speak. "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 in court, but the prosecution has a very strong case. Scores of witnesses, some of whom died for their beliefs. 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."

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. 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?"

"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's accuracy. Even our attorney agrees. If you believe that this is where the evidence points, 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 be ready to receive them with joy."

The judge replied, "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 way 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 worked toward a consensus. Most of them were ready to cast a vote of guilty as soon as 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 maintained, "I don't care how many witnesses there are. I don't believe that book, and nothing will ever persuade me differently." The eleven saw they were getting nowhere and informed the court. The judge called the three remaining defendants before his bench, read the verdict, 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 liking, 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 and 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 down the front steps. 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 back 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 we have much to discuss. Let's do it Friday."

As people were leaving, David found Anna and asked her 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?"

"I finished it last night."

"What? When did you start?"

"Three weeks ago. I spent several hours a day on it. If you're taking a class, you read the textbook. I'm glad spring semester is ending. I was able to get out of teaching any classes this summer, so I can focus totally on the search."

"What did you think of the story, 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, that changes everything."

"But why are you scared?"

David stopped walking. "I might make the wrong choice. I thought I was the one chasing the truth, but now the truth is chasing me. I'm being painted into a corner."

Anna sighed. "I wish I had the right words for you, but I'm fighting my own battle. My heels are dug into the ground, and I'm being pulled forward against my will. I'm tempted to let go and walk away from the whole thing."

The next evening, Cooper was coming out of a store downtown when he ran into the pastor of his old church.

"Cooper! What a pleasant surprise."

"Hi, Pastor."

"I haven't seen you at church in over a 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 church leadership mishandled that situation with the youth pastor."

"I see. So you are still holding a grudge over that."

"It's not a grudge. I could never be part of a church that made a mistake that big. And you know I'm not the only one who felt 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, then nodded and said, "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 the rest of us are expected to meekly submit. Not me. I've had it up to here. I'll follow God my own way."

"Do you think we could sit down and ta—"

"I said I've had enough." Cooper stormed away down the sidewalk.

CHAPTER 14

Friday

David got the meeting underway. "I expect a lively discussion tonight over Wednesday's story. I came up with a list of things to observe during our debating. First, no one is allowed to fall back on the excuse that the Bible has been changed in copying since we've already voted on that." David pointed to the stone. "Secondly, no anti-supernatural bias will be permitted. In other words, no dismissing a biblical account only because it contains a miracle. Any questions about that?"

Someone from the crowd said, "I have to accept all the miracles in the Bible?"

David answered, "To pronounce a miracle fake, you must have a reason."

"I don't believe in them. Isn't that reason enough?"

David explained, "To simply declare that miracles are impossible, you would have to be omniscient. If you are told about a miracle, you must accept it if the evidence is credible. Your preconception that miracles don't happen can never by itself be a cause for denying them."

David continued, "Thirdly, no relying on hearsay. We are judging what the biblical authors wrote, not what other people say they wrote." David held up a Bible. "This is what's on trial, not the thousands of opinions surrounding it. Consequently, if you are ignorant of what is said in here, don't bring a charge against it."

Someone asked, "If we haven't read the Bible, we can't join the discussion?"

"You may join the discussion, but you have no right to doubt a witness before you've ever heard them out. Some of you may be thinking that you already know what the Bible says since you've heard people talk about it."

That's hearsay. I thought the same thing, until I read the Bible for myself and was amazed to discover that much of what I had heard was way off."

"Fourthly, every one of us believes some of the events and dialogues of the Bible took place. What is on trial here is whether all of it occurred. If you want to accept some and reject the rest, you must have sound justification for each specific passage you throw out. Merely declaring that you don't think a particular event occurred is not good enough.

"Fifthly, what is being decided is whether these things happened. Don't get sidetracked on why there is not more evidence, or evidence of a different kind. This is all we've been given. The only question we are asking is, "Did it happen as written?"

Liz Did you see how the prosecutor presented his case? Here are my witnesses. If you can't show they were wrong, you must accept what they say. Does everyone 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 strange to remain on the fence.

Mary The ones still on the fence are like that juror who stood against the other eleven. She had one of those attitudes we covered in the earlier stories.

Elliot This presumes 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 that they can't be trusted.

Paul I'll mention some biblical episodes and you tell us the contradictory accounts. The miraculous birth of Isaac, conquest of Canaan, building of the temple twice, Elijah raising the dead, words of the prophet Daniel, John the Baptist's ministry, all of Jesus' miracles, Peter healing a cripple, Paul's conversion and all of his letters to the chu—

Tyler I'm not too familiar with those. I meant other ones.

Owen So what Paul listed can't be tossed out with the contradiction test.

Tyler I'll have to get back to you on that.

Karl Can I make a suggestion? We've already spent two evenings on this topic. I'm beginning to realize that some people refuse to give the Bible a fair trial, and accusing it of discrepancies is their excuse for ignoring it. I don't want to waste any more of our time answering their silly objections. I've read these lists of supposed contradictions and to me they are nonsense, like the Nomasa story showed.

Liz I agree. We could be here all night trying to answer every one.

Elliot So your reason for ignoring them is because there are too many?

Liz I haven't ignored them. I've read them, and I agree with Karl; they're ridiculous. I don't want to be bogged down by those who aren't interested in the truth.

David We already covered this topic in depth. Nothing is preventing anyone from studying it outside this meeting. I propose we ban this topic from further discussion.

Elliot That's censorship. What happened to your noble search for truth?

Jose I think David's proposal is fair. Can we vote on it?

David How many in the covenant want to allow further discussion of contradictions?

Two people raised their hands.

David That settles it. What are some other issues?

Jose These witnesses are all dead, and have been for a long time. We can't question them, and we don't know anything about them.

Geoff How does that make what they said wrong?

Jose It doesn't, but I need more to go on.

Geoff You're jumping ahead. We are only deciding if what they said happened. Does the fact that they are dead discredit what they wrote?

Jose No, I guess it doesn't.

Sandra What about the accusation that they forgot by the time they wrote it down? I think that's extremely weak, but I wonder if anyone else agrees.

Although this was his first meeting, Perry leapt right into the debate.

Perry I disagree. People forget things all the time.

Sandra Not the kinds of things in the Bible. If you saw someone come back to life, you would never forget it.

Perry Maybe, but there are all these speeches, sermons, and prayers in the Bible. Do you really believe someone got every word right when they wrote it down decades later?

Dino had been only listening for two weeks, but decided to speak up.

Dino Why do you assume it was only written down decades later? Pretend I hand you a sheet of paper and tell you in all seriousness that this contains the words that our pastor said to my wife and I during our wedding thirty years ago. Would you believe it to be what he actually said?

Perry I guess I would.

Dino How is that possible, thirty years later?

Perry I presume you could have written it down back then, or you have a good memory, or you asked your wife.

Dino Most people aren't in the habit of making things up, especially regarding sacred events. I'm not going to say these words were uttered in my wedding if I can't remember.

Latisha If the biblical authors wrote down a speech or parable, we can assume they knew what was said; otherwise, they would not have written it down.

Cooper That assumes they were honest and reliable.

Mary Yes. You have to 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 handy to play the liar card when you don't want to believe something.

Cooper What are you talking about? You don't believe this stuff either.

Jose We may be at the same place, but we are going in totally different directions.

Karl How about the fact that the Bible is the only source for most of what it reports?

Anna That's concerned me. Some of these events were spectacular. Why didn't anyone else write about them?

David That one has bothered me too.

Paul Israel and the early Christians wrote their accounts, so you must be talking about why the Gentiles didn't report it.

Anna Mostly.

Paul You are inferring from their silence that they would have disagreed. Is that reasonable?

Anna Someone would have written something.

Paul Most of the episodes were not seen by Gentiles. Writing was rare in those days. Maybe they wrote something and it was lost. In some cases, they had reasons not to publish what happened. Most people don't write books no matter how amazing their experience was. Are you sure the only explanation for their silence is that these things didn't occur?

David You're right. We can't interview these other witnesses. All we know is they didn't come forward to offer their version. A court of law would never allow that to discredit the witnesses that did come forward.

Jose The story talked about myths, and 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 ghosts?

Paul I'll tell you why. How many people who have supposedly seen UFOs, Bigfoot, or ghosts are building churches so they can teach their children about them, are giving ten percent of their income to this cause, and are sending missionaries around the world?

Tyler Look, here's what happened. The Jews probable came out of Egypt and got into the land of Palestine somehow. After a while they started to write down what happened and someone added the miracles. It's that simple.

Owen What about all the laws Moses gave them?

Tyler When they came out of Egypt, someone made up some laws, Moses, if he really existed, or whoever.

Owen Why do you think they came out of Egypt?

Tyler That's what their history says.

Jose Why do you not doubt they came out of Egypt, but doubt the miracles?

- Tyler Because they could have easily been made up and added later.
- Jose That's not an answer. Why do you doubt one and not the other?
- Tyler Because I don't think any miracles—Oh, I see. You think you've got me on the anti-supernatural bias 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 What I mean is, you've helped me see how I've accepted everything else the Bible says and doubted the miracles, but I've only done that out of bias.
- David Do you know how many miracles Moses is said to have done, and how dramatic they were?
- Mary Yes, I do, but give me one reason to doubt what the author of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy wrote.
- David Things like that don't—uh, never mind. Doesn't it seem much more likely that the accounts of miracles were slipped in later?
- Paul How can you assign likelihood to the possibility of miracles? That's like trying to define the probability that mankind could exist.
- Cooper He's got you, David. Everyone agrees miracles are rare. But who among us can calculate the probability of there being a concentration of miracles in one nation?
- 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 if a concentration of miracles in ancient Israel is likely or not. 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, isn't it? Maybe the church made up those stories about Jesus' miracles and rising from the dead to comfort themselves or 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 if it was true.
- Karl Sure they would. Pick a famous American who lived forty years ago. What if I invent stories about him doing amazing miracles

and rising from the dead? Be honest, 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 Then they knew it was a lie, but chose to follow it anyway. According to some of you, lots of people do that with other religions.

Sandra No, they don't, because they don't know if their religion is true or not; they've just chosen to believe it. The crucial distinction with the early Christians is that thousands had followed Jesus and his disciples after him, so they knew whether their religion was a lie. Yet they still followed it, many to the point of martyrdom.

Owen Liz, you sound like the defense attorney. Why are you determined to make these people devils or dimwits? Why not accept what they told you?

Liz That's a good question.

Elliot First we're asked to accept that the Bible wasn't changed. Now we are told not to worry about whether the message is from God, just concede it happened. Next there will be another concession, and then another. Don't you see where this is leading?

Liz What are you saying?

Elliot I'm not going to keep giving ground until there's nothing left.

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 Look at the stuff they wrote. It's 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 this more clearly. Why should I doubt them? All I'm hearing from you 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.

Dino A couple weeks ago you argued that there is zero evidence for the Jews altering their holy books, and the last 2,500 years show that

they were totally averse to doing this. Why do you suggest it now?

David Just exploring possibilities.

Owen How about the prophets? They predicted the exile of the country to Babylon and their return seventy years later, as well as many other future events. If they had only said these things after they occurred, would the Jews have preserved their books as the word of God?

David That does seem unlikely. Maybe nobody cared about their scriptures except for a few priests.

Dino You more than anyone should know how far that is from the truth. Everything about the Jews is intimately wrapped up in the Old Testament. It is their national history. The same is true with Christians and the New Testament.

Sandra Listen, David. Every American knows that we started using our Constitution in the late seventeen hundreds. You are suggesting that a clever storyteller first introduced it in the late eighteen hundreds. Then he somehow got the whole country to forget what he did and think that it was actually in use for a hundred years before that. That is beyond ridiculous. The Jews and Christians have one history. Why are you straining so hard to invent alternate ones?

David Not all of it, only the mirac—What is going on? Someone help me.

Anna No one believes that they were all deceived, century after century. That is preposterous on so many levels.

Geoff That would be impossible since so many miracles were public. They were fed by manna from heaven in the desert for forty years.

Anna Right. So the only way this could possibly work is if the books were introduced at least several generations after the supposed events.

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 things that already happened. Everybody would know his writings just appeared. In 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.

Paul You mean, only the authors were liars, century after century.

David Maybe the authors also thought there was some truth to it.

Paul Who are you, and what have you done with David Ruben? This isn't the David I've come to know, 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 also claim that those who first read these books believed them to be truthful. Otherwise, it would make Jews and Christians the perpetrators of the biggest hoax in the history of the world, a hoax they knowingly deceived their children with. Do you agree?

David Agreed. As Anna said, it would be bizarre for the nation of Israel and the early Christians to embrace it as they did, if they knew it was a lie. Most of them must have believed it.

Paul Now listen carefully. They were much closer in time to these things than you are—within decades or a couple centuries compared to the thousands of years you are removed from it. They were also much closer than you in knowledge of the culture, nation, language, and historical context. In short, they were in a much better position to pass judgment on these stories than you are. According to you, thousands of them believed these events were true the moment they read them. Here's the question: How is it you are sure that 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 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 back then. 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 paused a little longer.

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.

No votes were cast by Elliot, Tyler, and Cooper. The rest voted yes. It barely passed. David made a stone named "History" and laid it solemnly 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 real close look to make sure. Even so, I was still wavering back and forth until you took your stand at the end."

"What do you mean?" David asked.

"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 some miracle stories about a famous American. Of course you had to say you would. You'll say anything as long as it throws mud on the other side's argument."

"Maybe I'm trying to stimulate healthy debate."

"Maybe you hate Christians. Why are you here?" shouted Hank.

"Would you please keep your voice down?"

"Too late. Your cover is 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 door, but no one answered, though the lights were on. Then he heard a weak voice calling, "Come in. Come in."

Tyler cracked the door and called, "Hello?"

A weak voice from down the hall said, "Come in, Tyler. I'm in my bedroom." Tyler turned into 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.

"Have you heard anything?"

"No, I've been out of touch. I've been ill lately."

"They're not going too badly. There was a debate the other night about the historicity of the Bible."

"It's no problem agreeing that some of the Bible is historically accurate."

"A few have started thinking all of it is," Tyler said.

"Ouch. We can't have that. Leaves no wiggle room. Not to worry. This is the easiest thing in the world to deal with. There are dozens of theories one can invent as to how the Bible was fabricated or altered. Since it happened long ago, no one can refute your theory of choice. If somebody doesn't accept one theory, try another one. Since most people are inclined to disbelieve the Bible, you'll soon hit on one that sounds plausible to them."

"How do we know it was made up?"

"What do you mean? We know the Bible couldn't all be true. So it doesn't matter which argument we use to discredit it."

"Shouldn't we start with the argument, and see if it leads to the conclusion?"

"Tyler, why are you talking like this? Are they starting to get to you? Anyone who says the entire Bible is historically accurate must have a devious purpose, or is a dimwit. Haven't you come to that conclusion about your friends?"

"Some of them seem okay."

"I haven't met your friends, but I already know what they're like. If they say the whole Bible is true, and plan to follow it, then they are dangerous agitators, who must be stopped. Am I right?"

"I guess."

"Watch yourself," warned Mr. Peterson. "I'm getting the impression they are making more progress than you have admitted. My best advice is to sling mud. Keep slinging it. Eventually, it will stick, at least in the minds

of a few, 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've missed something.' They forget that almost no one rejects Christ because of the facts. They reject him because of the dark demons of the heart such as rebellion, greed, malice, envy, lust, deceit, arrogance, and folly. But enough of that topic. Here is some mud to throw. Lump Christians together with every cult, kook, and heretic you can think of." Peterson chuckled. "Outsiders don't know the difference. And another thing, when you see a Middle Eastern practice in the Bible that's foreign to Western culture, say, 'That's a strange way to do it.' The implication is that it must have been made up. As soon as you cast suspicion on one passage, they start thinking that all of them could be unreliable."

"If I throw too much mud, they get suspicious."

"Then throw words. Just keep talking about anything and everything that seems remotely related to the topic: Christian history, clever anecdotes, popular 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 criticizing the Bible, don't forget to add that lovely phrase 'most scholars believe.'"

"But I don't know what most scholars believe."

"Don't worry about that. No one ever checks the references. What matters is listing them for the sake of appearances. 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 worse they are, the more you should call them Christians, and the more you should talk about them. This gives their faith a black eye. You can also make fun of the Bible's moral teachings that have fallen out of favor in our day. This makes it look unappealing, particularly to hedonists. You see, 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 big, it's not hard to find something that seems to be a flaw." Mr. Peterson stopped and put his hand on his head.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine. I just need a little rest. Now where was I? I'm sorry, but I lost my train of thought."

"You were saying how easy it is to find something that looks like a flaw."

"If you're lucky, their own pastors and teachers will do it for you." Mr. Peterson started to chuckle. "I get a kick out of the ridiculous theories that have come out of our seminaries over the past 150 years."

"What theories?"

"Biblical scholars who dissect every book of the Bible, questioning its authorship, its historicity, and its transmission." Mr. Peterson laughed louder now. "My favorite one is multiple authors for one book. They portray some ancient editor splicing together two stories into one, taking a sentence from one and then a sentence from the other. I bust a gut laughing when these fools say this editor must have been doing 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 there are many pastors who still use the whole Bible as a reliable instruction manual from God." 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." On the porch, Tyler asked Mr. Peterson about an ornately decorated shield mounted next to his front door. "That was the coat of arms for one of my ancestors. I acquired it years ago when I traveled to Norway to visit the land of my forefathers. Did I ever mention to you, Tyler, that I'm an elder in my church?"

"What?"

"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 seemed 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 just like him, barely able to walk, waiting around to die. Did anyone else ever think

about this stuff? Tyler was glad no one could read his thoughts; they were too depressing. It occurred to him that Mr. Peterson was the same age as Hank. Those two were going in very different directions.

Sunday after lunch, Hank appeared at David's front door. They waited until a 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 mind telling 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 of it is historical, but part of it's made up. It's filled with discrepancies, and the people copying it kept changing it to suit their tastes."

"You forgot one," Hank said.

"What's that?"

"When they picked which books go in the Bible, they picked the wrong ones."

The man smiled. "I like it. Throw that one in too."

David continued questioning him. "Did you discover this by your own study of the Bible and its background?"

"Nah, I've never read it. I heard that a bunch of Bible scholars figured this all out. I'm not interested in all that ancient history stuff, so I let them do my thinking for me. They're experts, so they wouldn't make a mistake."

David looked concerned, so the man blurted, "What? Are you telling me someone thinks otherwise?"

"A few more than last month," Hank said wryly.

The man replied, "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 has voted. How could most of us be wrong? Say, I gotta go. Have fun. I'm glad my teacher didn't make me do what you're doing. At least you got your dad to come along."

On the sidewalk Hank said, "Do I look Jewish?"

The next place found David and Hank talking with a woman who said, "I believe in the Bible."

"Which part?" David asked.

"All of it. Are you guys from that everlasting life group everyone's talking about?"

"What have they been saying?"

"You name it: good, bad, and indifferent. Are you part of a cult?"

"Not yet," teased Hank.

"It sounds real 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 or Christian group?"

"Usually not."

"Do you put into practice what the Bible teaches?"

"No."

"May I ask why not?" probed David.

"I 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 are ready to face Jesus when he returns?"

"Um, I guess so. I'll find out when he gets here. Best of luck in spreading the gospel."

After she closed the door, Hank said, "Maybe we should have told her we're not Christians."

"That woman had a very strange approach to the Bible," David commented.

Hank chuckled. "You're new to this whole Christianity thing, aren't you?"

David knocked on another door and a kindly gentleman answered. "That's an excellent question, and I'm qualified to answer since I'm a pastor of a church in town."

David brightened up. "How interesting. Do you believe the entire Bible is true?"

"Yes," he said confidently.

"Do you put the Bible's teachings into practice?"

The pastor began, "Let me explain the approach I use for preaching in my church. I've taken a colored marker to my Bible and highlighted all the passages that talk about God's 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 all the things God asks us to do for him, especially giving up sin. You have to be very careful to only highlight the part of a verse with a promise and leave out the part with the conditions. That way, everything is unconditional."

"Doesn't your congregation mind?"

"They don't seem to notice. It appears I'm using the whole Bible, since there are so many verses to draw from. In fact, they prefer the message this way. It sure packs the church on Sunday. Long ago I decided to set the bar really low, so a lot more can be saved. Now all they have to do is say one short prayer and really mean it."

"Are you sure it works that way?" Hank said.

"Sure it does. I've got hundreds of decisions for Christ to prove it."

David asked, "So, 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. All I have to do is 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 threatened upon the wicked. I use only those nice 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 know I'm doing it. A lot of those behind the pulpit are doing this and don't realize it. Haven't you ever noticed the dominant themes of people's favorite verses or popular Christian music?"

"Do you ever talk about the hard passages?"

"Sure, I touch on them once in a while so people don't get suspicious, but at the end of my message I always nullify their effect 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, I'm sure he will forgive me. I've got to run to 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 reaching 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 prudish 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 right now 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 only 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," she said, "and it's not looking very promising. Since you are obviously men of God, would you mind saying a quick prayer for him?"

David said, "Uh, sure. We can do that later."

"I mean right now. Please?"

David glanced around to see if anyone was watching, and by the time he looked back, the woman and Hank had already bowed their heads and closed their eyes. There were several seconds of awkward silence as David

struggled to force something out, but nothing came. Finally Hank said, "Our Father in heaven, please show your great mercy to this dear woman's uncle. Amen."

"Thank you," she said.

David said meekly, "I'm sorry, ma'am. Praying isn't my strong suit."

"That's okay. It's a shame you couldn't meet my uncle. He would have enjoyed debating with you two about religion."

Hank said, "We hope he gets better. Before you leave, would you mind telling us, what is this beautiful ornament mounted next to the door?"

"Certainly. That's the coat of arms from one of my uncle's Norwegian relatives."

CHAPTER 15

Monday



Claims

There was a certain business that fell on hard times. The management met to consider how 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 that he can do it all."

"He doesn't lack confidence. Anyone can boast. I want to hear from those who've worked with him, to see if his deeds match his words."

Someone else said, "Agreed. Let us visit some 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 they 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 many 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 said, "I think I've found it." The team made plans to visit this business.

On the morning of the interview, the team was ushered into the executive conference room where the entire senior staff was waiting to meet them. The team said, "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 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, business models, sales strategies, 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 a clear answer to that question."

"You certainly have the information we have 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 So who are the businesses the team visited in the story?

Karl They are paths or religions. 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 what he is like, listen to them.

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 taking us on the path of Christianity, and in that faith eternal life only comes through God.
- Elliot I can live with that for now. How about you, Tyler?
- Tyler Fine.
- Mary Does it 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, it's not just that the Bible tells us about God, but it shows his work.
- Sandra Talk is cheap. Other religious writings talk about what God could do. The Bible tells us what he *did*.
- Owen And just as important, these words and deeds weren't witnessed by just one man, but by dozens of men and women over many centuries. An earlier story mentioned the number of prophets, Jews who had direct contact with God.
- Latisha It said there were over one hundred of them.
- David So Israel is where God showed himself. At least the Bible claims this.
- Anna Other cultures and religions have stories about God.
- Paul They do. But consider these: number of witnesses, proofs, grounding in real history, how many times God is claimed to be acting or speaking, miracles, fulfilled predictions, response of its followers, what is promised, worldwide impact, etc. Compare these factors, and Christianity stands as a giant sequoia tree amid daisies. This isn't an empty boast. It's what we found during our search.
- Tyler Christianity does boast to be the warehouse of truth 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. Anyone can say, "I am God." If I did, you'd laugh at me.
- 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 Not on this scale. The others got a small following that 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. Someone else go ahead.
- Paul Compared to other religions, the claims of Christianity are extraordinary. In contrast, no one bothers disputing the claims of other faiths because they don't say anything remarkable that demands our attention.
- Elliot But does Christianity promise eternal life?
- David Yes. I made sure to look for that when I read the Bible. It's shown in a limited way in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament Jesus promised it clearly and often, as did his followers.
- 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 as needed, 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, but are you willing to take complaints?"

David glanced at Jose with raised eyebrows. "Yes. What is it?"

"I've come several times in the past month. You people never get into details. It's all attitudes and broad concepts. Now that you're talking about Christianity, am I expected to just accept what somebody says is in the Bible? I need facts, and lots of them."

David replied, "You're right about the facts, but we don't have time for that here. I'm a teacher, and I expect my students to study outside of class. As for what's in the Bible, read it yourself. I read it in three weeks, and now I'm reading it again."

"What about all this background stuff on the Bible these Christians keep bringing up? I don't even know where to find that kind of information."

"There are tons of books and other resources," Jose said. "All you have to do is start looking. You'll find it. Ask at a library, a Bible school, or a church. I've been doing that for months, and I have a full time job, a wife, and two children at home."

"I was kind of hoping we could cover those things here."

David said, "There are no shortcuts. I asked my college for a leave of absence this summer, so I could spend all my time between meetings doing the kind of factual research you're asking about."

After the woman left, David tracked down Sandra and asked, "How's Mary doing?"

Sandra frowned. "Getting weaker all the time. I don't know how many meetings she can still attend. I'm surprised she's still here. 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 a page."

When Sandra left, David found Karl and told him, "Something different is going on. 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."

"I haven't forgotten it. According to the Bible, God's not too happy when we do what's wrong."

"What are you going to do?"

David said, "I don't know yet. What about you?"

"I'm following you, but farther behind. Sorry, I don't have the answers. Maybe you should talk to one of the Christians."

"I'll see. 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?"

"I'm not ready yet."

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 for a quick lunch in the Vanberth courtyard. Evelyn walked by, heading for her office, when she 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 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'd better get right to the point," Evelyn said. "It's the group meeting at your house. The school has some concern about its effect on our image."

David was puzzled. "I don't understand how it could hurt. Even our school vision statement talks about a passion for truth. Is there something wrong with my group seeking the truth?"

"Yes, if it's a truth that might offend someone," Evelyn said. "You are getting a lot of attention, and rumors are flying around town. I'm sure most of them aren't true."

"Most? No one from the college administration has been to a meeting. Why don't they come over and see what is really going on instead of relying on rumors?"

"They don't have time for that. Their concern is how this looks. Parents are entrusting their children to us. Our image is everything."

David suggested, "Maybe I can do something about it, but please tell me what the school is concerned with."

"There is a perception of exclusivism and extremism. People are saying your group calls some religions wrong. I'm sure you aren't that intolerant, but if people want to believe it, we can't stop them, and the school's reputation is tarnished."

"I see. What are you suggesting?"

"Canceling the group would be the best way to quell the rumors, but I know that is a lot to ask. If you issued a statement in the newspaper saying

that you embrace all faiths as equally valid, this would make a lot of people happy."

David stared at the horizon behind Evelyn. "If we keep going as is, what would happen?"

"I can't predict how the school management would react, but your job could be in jeopardy. You have staff here who like you, but every day this continues, you are spending your capital."

"Evelyn, what do you personally think about what we're doing?"

Evelyn looked around and lowered her voice. "I've always been active in my church with the music program and finance committee, so I'm sympathetic with those on a spiritual quest. But I keep it in perspective. Too much emphasis on faith is unhealthy."

"What do you think about our stated goal, to find eternal life?"

"I appreciate my church because it doesn't get sidetracked on heaven. We keep our focus on improving life right here."

"If you were me, what would you do?"

"I'd tell your people you are 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 stormed out of the courtyard. He headed straight for his boss'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 the last semester passed by. "Hi, Mr. Ruben. How's it going?"

"Hi, Craig."

"You waiting for someone?"

"No, just thinking."

"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 a lot of students say they respect you for that."

David smiled. "Thanks, Craig. You've made my day."

Wednesday

As people arrived, Karl mentioned to David, "We haven't played racquetball in months."

"At the end of your life, which would you rather say, I played a lot of racquetball, or I found out how to live forever?"

"You're too rational," Karl said.

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 phone calls."

Owen said, "I'll stop by his apartment. I know where he lives."



Proof

There was once a large city with a notorious slum near downtown. Children who ran away from home, or were abandoned, took refuge in the slum. They barely survived by stealing from adjacent neighborhoods at night. The conditions in the slum were deplorable, but the government made no attempt to help the children. In fact, the city banned all 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. Conditions in the slum alternated between anarchy and gang rule. Most of its inhabitants came to believe that life in the slum 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 come 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 the slum 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 the slum youths 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 consciences would not allow them to enjoy the estate while others still suffered in the slum.

One day, a large collection of children from one of the slum's gangs 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 to give it up. 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."

Another boy asked to be heard. "You think these youths are just like us. In fact, there is far more to them, and what they've done in our midst for years is the proof. You have all seen the lavish feasts they often 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 extra 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, "So 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 the same day 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 some 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, but so that we listen to their message and come live with them. I hold in my hand one of the maps they leave all over the place, which shows the way to their home. If they only had our abilities, then 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 hangs on him, but none of us has ever seen him."

The boy reasoned, "Where do you think these youths got their treasures? Who built their home? Who turned their lives around and put new clothes on their back? Who keeps sending new ones after they grow up or we murder them? Does this all come from thin air? They claim to have seen him. Their miraculous help proves not only that this Humanitarian exists, but that he has 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 plans to burn this entire area to the ground without 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 is ridiculous," said one of the gang, "They'll never 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. They loved their lives of crime in the slum and doubted the message and proofs of the reformed youths. Because 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 as an example to the rest."

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 them a team with more treasures than ever before. I want them to see my face also. Since I cannot go, I will send someone who looks just like me. To lead this team, I will send my one and only Son, whom I dearly love."



- Liz (Wiping away tears.) He came after 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 always been this way.
- 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.
- Sandra The story from a few weeks ago said the Bible had over two hundred miracles done by lots of people over many centuries.

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 already have a proven track record of fixing that type of problem.

Paul Other religions like to make promises, but don't bother asking them for examples of previous work.

Latisha The miracles also prove God wants to help us. They show his intentions, which is why we can trust him.

Ramon had sat in on a few meetings, but was still skeptical.

Ramon You can say all you want. I don't believe those miracles happened.

David Why not?

Ramon Because 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 know of solid evidence of a miracle happening in your lifetime. Not just good fortune, but clear evidence of a supernatural occurrence. If you raise your hand, we might ask you to defend your evidence.

Five people raised their hands.

David So much for your ancient books theory.

Ramon That doesn't prove anything.

David Why not?

Ramon If I quizzed them, I'd find either that their miracle was only good luck, or they are trying to get me saved.

Jose That's the "They're all dimwits or deceivers" defense.

David Jose is right. Personally, I'm still skeptical of miracles. You might be right about some of them, but there's no way you can be sure it's true of all of them. You were presented with five people who claim evidence of modern miracles, 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 mouths. Is that reasonable?

The man had nothing to say. A woman named Britt, sitting next to Ramon, piped in.

Britt If you know ahead of time that miracles can't possibly happen, then you can assume those people must be wrong, without hearing from them.

David How can you know that ahead of time?

Britt Because there is no evidence for miracles.

David sighed.

Elliot Come on. Are you telling me no one here 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 I'm not sure. I haven't actually read the Bible.

Jose Aaargh!

Tyler Paul, you know the Bible, and you're careful with the truth. What do you think about its miracles? Are they convincing?

Paul I think most of them are very convincing and cannot be attributed to coincidence or a natural explanation. Some leave absolutely no room for doubt.

Karl Let's talk about predictions. That story a few weeks ago said there were over two hundred.

Jose Same question as before. How many can be chalked up to luck?

Sandra Same answer. Most were clearly miraculous. Go read it for yourself. And they were never wrong in their predictions.

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 imprisonment of the King, 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 That earlier story said most of the Bible's predictions came true within days, months, or a few years. How is that proof for us? How do I know the prediction was actually 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 some stranger's story. It's the testimony of a nation for two millennia. Scores of men died for this story, men in perfect position to know whether it was real.
- Elliot Eloquently said, but I still don't trust them.
- Liz Aaargh!
- Elliot That wasn't quite 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 had attended off and on. He thought now was a good time to use his knowledge of the Bible.
- Henri Other religions don't stick their neck out like Christianity does, 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 anyone 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, many. Here are a few. Four thousand years ago, God promised Abraham that his name would become great, but this was still not true two thousand years ago. Since then it has been fulfilled as the Christian message spread over the world, making his name famous worldwide. The same thing occurred with King David. Egypt was a great power in the Middle East for over two thousand years, and we still have the pyramids to prove it. Around five

hundred B.C., a Hebrew prophet said they 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 and never be inhabited again. Its ruins were found under the desert sand only in recent times. The prophets never said this of Damascus, Rome, or Athens, but they did say Jerusalem would be destroyed and rebuilt, and it was. Jesus later predicted Jerusalem would be 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 bet they never told you this either. About 3,500 years ago, Moses predicted the rebellion of the Jewish nation against their God, and the resulting consequences. He foresaw them living in a pitiful state of fear and oppression among the nations. Anyone who knows the dreadful history of the Jews over the past two thousand years will be amazed at how Moses could have predicted it way beforehand. A thousand years after Moses, the Hebrew prophets predicted that God would return the sons of Abraham from exile to their land. God did this, twice.

Liz Those same prophets, and the apostles, and Jesus predicted eternal life in God's future kingdom. They proved their words can be trusted, just like the Humanitarian's youths. They show us the way.

Anna Liz, are you preaching to us?

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 will vote on whether you agree with this statement: The Bible includes many miracles and fulfilled predictions that prove who God spoke through, what his powers are, and what his 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 post's peg. Then she turned around with a big smile and gave the spectators a bow. Many in the crowd clapped and cheered. Sandra ran over to Liz and gave her a hug. The rest watched in silence.

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 to see if she sticks with it."

Sandra found Paul and told him, "Anna just told me she thinks Liz did that to attract David."

Paul said sternly, "Sandra, why are you telling me this?"

"You're right," Sandra confessed. "I'm gossiping. Sorry."

After most of the people 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 some personal habits, which may not fit with the Bible's morals. I think someone with these habits might have to give them up to become a Christian. But what if that person is so attached to these habits that he doesn't think he could ever stop them? Do they have to be stopped, and what if it's impossible?"

Paul said, "With God, nothing is impossible. First you would need to determine if these habits are indeed sinful. If so, then they must be stopped, but God 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 was sure I could never break it. But God knew I had to give it up, and he finally convinced me. Now I wouldn't go back to it if you held a gun to my head. God delivered me from that sin. He can do the same for you. And don't worry; I will never breathe a word of this conversation to another soul."

David remarked, "So they aren't just empty words in some old book."

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 up 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 not the time to drop out of the race."



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, remote island, which was inhabited by a primitive people. The island had no suitable bay for his large vessel, so his sailors ferried the 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 would work for me.

You will find me fair 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 just, wise and kind. He was also a pure man, having no vices. From time to time, he would divulge veiled promises concerning his future plans. Over time they came to see the unchanging nature of his character and purpose.

The castle grew large enough for Andrew's family to move in. This they were glad to do since the castle was far better than any dwelling on the island. Because the Islanders typically 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 all the sons of Andrew were 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 men whose job it was to remind the sons of Andrew about the contract. The Architect's messengers were known because they possessed his special powers and could foretell the future. They 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 those who warned them. When the Architect returned from his travels, he would judge his people. The stubborn were chastised, and the defiant were banished from the castle, but the trustworthy were rewarded. Those who had done wrong could be reinstated, if their repentance was genuine.

During these days, the Architect would often raise up deliverers from the descendants of Andrew who would rescue the people from foreign tribes or become leaders over the castle dwellers. Some of the leaders did

what was right, but some were wicked men who disdained the Architect and the house he had built for them.

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 specially qualified man would come from the sons of Andrew, like all the Architect's servants, but he would be much greater. 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 instead they 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 until their Master took pity and allowed them to return. Many never did return, and they spread throughout the island instead. Even after this chastisement, some served him outwardly but not with their hearts. Meanwhile, the Architect's servants continued to predict a great day, when the just would enjoy forever the Architect's island, but the depraved would be destroyed, 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 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 that 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 by teaching his followers the way of holiness and love, and he told them to call him the Builder.

The Builder announced the fulfillment of 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. 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 covenant would be ratified by 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 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 preferred the same people as he. You look, act, and speak like him. You fulfill the roles of all the deliverers, rulers, and messengers he appointed, but are greater than the greatest of them. You have his powers and his virtues. You have never repudiated anything he said, but in every way have continued his passion to build a home for his faithful ones. You embody his mercy, purity, and justice. Of you, it can surely be said that the Son is exactly 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 so far is in harmony with what they proclaimed, as is everything you have promised to still do. Truly, the eternal kingdom of your Father has been planted here by you, a kingdom which will grow and 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, receiving the exact same treatment as the Architect's

previous messengers. However, the Builder's servants immediately began spreading his message all over the island, as the Architect's messengers had predicted. They proclaimed that the Builder was alive and was ready to forgive and receive all who trusted in him, both sons of Andrew and 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 castle continued to expand in the hearts and lives of the Islanders, preparing them for the great day when the Architect and his Son would return in glory.



- Jose What do you think, David? Is the Son just like the Father?
- David Why ask me? I don't know any more about the God of the Old Testament than you. I was a secular Jew.
- Karl Did you notice how the Architect's plans were revealed to the sons of Andrew and then to the islanders in stages?
- Latisha It's like viewing a picture from far away. As you walk toward it, the details get clearer.
- Sandra As you near the picture, you don't expect it to change. That's what we see in the Bible. As the story progresses, it's the same message only clearer.
- Britt, who voiced her skepticism at an earlier meeting, spoke up again.
- Britt Is that really the case? I think the message does keep changing.
- David How many times have you read through the whole Bible?
- Britt I haven't read the Bible, but I read a magazine article that said so.
- Elliot I've read a lot of it and I can see differences.
- Paul Parents deal with their child differently when they are two, twelve and twenty-two, but it's the same parents. The Bible covers the life of a nation and has a rich variety of stories, but it's the same God throughout. From Genesis to Revelation, God never deviates from his purpose.
- Liz And what is that purpose?
- Sandra To have a family. And he will, guaranteed. No one is going to stop him. The only question is, who will be part of that family?

Mary This story implied that Jesus' words and deeds closely paralleled the Old Testament. Is that true?

Owen The story only gave a few examples, but books could be filled with the ways in which Jesus' ministry, message, and purpose exactly mirrored the ways of God in the Old Testament.

Noah was a Jewish man who had come to the meeting out of curiosity.

Noah I've heard that before. Obviously, whoever wrote the New Testament slanted it to fabricate those similarities.

Geoff So what you're saying is that if someone actually lived the life described by the gospels, he would probably be the Messiah.

Noah I guess so, but we know that no one ever did.

David Why do you think the gospels were fabricated?

Noah Come on, nobody could do all that stuff.

David There are many Old Testament stories that are just as supernatural.

Noah I don't think those happened either, for the same reason.

David So even you see the similarity between Jesus and the Old Testament.

Mary We haven't ever 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 people see Christians and Jews as followers of different faiths who happen to disagree on the identity of Jesus. However, this is not the Old Testament's perspective. During the history of Israel, there were always Jews who resisted God and persecuted those he sent, from Joseph and Moses to David and the prophets. When the Jews rejected Jesus, they were just doing it again.

Anna That's a pretty strong accusation.

Paul This isn't my opinion. Large portions of the Old Testament describe God's extreme displeasure toward the Jews who rejected what he was telling them to do. When Jesus appeared, the Jews who served the God of Abraham recognized him because the Son is just like the Father. Jews who were enemies of God were naturally enemies of his Son as well.

Elliot How can you say they were enemies of God? The Jews in Jesus' time were very devoted to their faith.

Sandra Some were, but their devotion was to Jewish rituals, embellished with man's ideas. They had little regard for God himself. The same is true today.

Anna David, do you agree?

David She might be right. Most of the Jews I know can be 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. There doesn't seem to be any fear of God in them.

Jose Some people have said 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 selectively focus on the mercy verses in the New Testament. 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, writing down the main points in each chapter. When you're done, consolidate your notes to a few pages, and you will see that the Bible is consistent from beginning to end. You'll also get a few surprises.

Tyler Are you kidding? That could take months.

David And your point is?

Jose (Grinning.) What he really meant to say is he'll get right on it.

Liz What surprises will I get?

Wayne Some favorite doctrines will barely be mentioned or totally absent. Other things you rarely hear in church will be stressed repeatedly.

Anna Like what?

Wayne I don't want to ruin the surprise.

Owen I don't need to bother with all 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, acting on his Father's authority, replaced that covenant with a better one based on following him by the Holy Spirit. This new covenant was for both Jew and Gentile, and it still requires holy and

loving behavior. However, some parts of the old covenant were made obsolete in the new one, the morally neutral parts such as food laws, animal sacrifices, festivals, and so on.

Mary Since we are asking questions, can someone explain what faith is, and how it fits with reason?

Karl I'll try. A family was departing on vacation. Their ten-year-old son didn't know what roads they would follow, where they would sleep that night, or where their 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. Faith is a good system. People use it every day with success. It always needs two parties, the one trusting and the one being trusted. The only way we could operate without faith would be if we knew everything. Since we don't, we depend on others for the gaps in our knowledge. Faith is assurance for 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. The only way faith can fail is if one of the parties doesn't hold up his end.

Mary Then what is doubt?

Liz Doubt is stubbornly refusing to trust someone who has earned your trust.

Anna I'd like to get back to the story. It implied that the Bible is the 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 went in a totally different direction? Don't waste our time with trivial or merely external differences. I want a major shift in direction.

No one responded.

David This is a good time to vote. The question we are voting on is what Anna just talked about: Is the Bible a continuous history of one God working one plan?

Two voted no, the other ten voted yes. David added a stone labeled "Unity" to the pillar.

Someone yelled from the back of the tent asking if they would still be meeting 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 to him again. "Paul, I think I have been one of those Jews the Old Testament talks about, the ones God is not happy with."

"When did you start believing there was a God?"

"I don't know, and I'm still not a hundred percent sure now."

"What's holding you back?"

David divulged, "Everything is moving too fast. What do you suggest I do?"

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 drove to a town near Ashbow to visit her parents. Since it was a holiday weekend, several relatives joined them for a big Sunday dinner. After the meal, Anna felt in a feisty mood and brought up the subject of religion. She started out asking if people thought all religions lead to God. Her cousin said, "I would hate to tell people from a different faith that their beliefs were wrong. That would be rude."

Anna continued, "Let's say I want to pick a religion. What would you tell me?"

"Pick whatever one you want, dear," Anna's mom said. "Didn't you say you were going to a Bible study group? Is that why you're asking these questions?"

"It's not a Bible study, it's a . . . spiritual seekers group."

"Really!" said the cousin. "What does your group say about different religions? Are they all basically the same?"

"Well, um, that would take a while to explain," Anna said.

Anna's aunt chimed in. "What I don't like is some fanatic saying his religion is the right one, and God will punish everyone who doesn't believe the same. That doesn't make any sense. Why would God do it that way?"

"I can see your point," Anna said.

"What is your group seeking to find?" asked the cousin.

"It's a little strange the way they put it, but they want to know which religion is true."

"True? What does that mean? As long as it makes a person happy, that's all that matters."

Anna explained, "They want to know which faith can get you to eter—uh, to heaven."

"I guess that might matter if you thought heaven was important," said her mother. "I agree with your cousin. Pick one that makes you happy."

The Aunt added, "Anna, I hope your seekers group enjoys themselves finding the truth. Just make sure you don't become intolerant and say anyone is wrong. Understand?"

"Sure, I understand . . . I think."

Monday

David announced, "This is the fourth meeting in a row that Cooper has missed. Owen, did you catch him at home?"

"Yes, I did over the weekend. He won't be coming back."

David shrieked, "Why? What happened?"

"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, but I got the impression this was about more than us. I think he's soured on his faith."

"Oh no!" cried Sandra.

David said, "He's broken the covenant. Not that I expect him back. I motion that he be removed from the covenant. Anyone opposed?" No one spoke up.

David lamented, "That's a tough blow. He was with us from near the beginning. It makes me appreciate every one of you who are 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 very large island, which was made into a prison colony. The worst criminals from all over the empire were banished there for the rest of their lives. As years went by, 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, a man 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, "This 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 some defects, but I've gotten used to it. I'll pass."

"Haven't you noticed 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 that the Warden is able to reform anyone to the extent that he boasts. This was a prison colony for many years. No one's going to suddenly throw us off the island, just 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 if they had not experienced the promised improvements, then the threat of eviction could be safely dismissed.

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, and purifies you. He assigns your work and distributes miraculous gifts to use in serving each other. 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. Is there fruit? Do the trainees actually experience these things?"

"I could answer that myself, but I assume that you prefer hearing it from their own lips."

"You are correct."

The gentleman led Jamil to a room with a table and a 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 stories. 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 so it went, as Jamil heard one after the other describe stories of miracles, supernatural guidance, conviction of sin, gifts of wisdom, knowledge of the future, 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, they began to feel 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 use 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 why these fraudulent trainees detract from the good people I just interviewed. By your own testimony, 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 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 counsel to them would be: 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 have kept you away 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. 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 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 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 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.



David Thank you, storyteller. What's the moral?

Latisha Will this tree bear fruit as advertized?

Jose In other words, does it work?

David Why is that important?

Anna Because the Bible pledges some 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 against the Bible's credibility.

Karl The story implied that the Trainer, the Holy Spirit I presume, is doing supernatural things in millions of Christians' lives. 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 is doing 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.

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." God's 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 seeing the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the Trainer. Our message to the unbeliever is to come and see. We aren't making this up.

Liz She's right. It's already started for 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 What's that?

Elliot Hypocrites. Those who prefer looking good over being good.

Geoff I don't think they're too common. What's your complaint?

Elliot They disprove the Bible's promise of changed lives. 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, passively waiting for the results. It is a twenty-four-hour-a-day program, for the rest of your life. A whole new

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 for them. Maybe they never showed up for class, or they didn't follow the instructor's guidelines.

Jose He's right. If all Christians were hypocrites that would be one thing, but if there are some of each, we 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.

David My suggestion is to 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 some examples of the work of the Holy Spirit they have seen.

Wayne, the pastor who shared at the previous gathering, spoke up.

Wayne I would be glad to. I have 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 his due honor.

Sandra Mary says thank you. She also asks if you could stop over to talk with her after the meeting.

Wayne I'd be delighted.

David I think the Old Testament prophets said the Messiah would purify his people.

Wayne He's doing it in churches all over 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 only from the Gentiles?

Paul In the Old Testament, God's people were the physical descendants of Abraham. Then Jesus appeared to announce the eternal kingdom of God, and the Gentiles were 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 children 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 No. They talk about their firm belief in the tenants of their faith, but rarely speak about God working in their life in a supernatural way today. For centuries, hoards of Christian missionaries have fanned out across the globe because they have personally experienced God's power, thus confirming Jesus' resurrection. This level of missionary zeal is found primarily in Christianity.

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 this up, why would they give up the comforts of home for a lifetime in a jungle?

David Maybe they assumed God was at work in their lives and interpreted each favorable turn of events as the work of God.

Karl Dimwit excuse.

David What?

Karl You accuse all 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 wasted their lives in the frozen arctic or on a lonely 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 lame arguments used against the Bible. These Christians claim they've seen God's power, but I don't want to believe it, so I simply accuse them all of simple-mindedness.

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, there are millions of Jewish and Gentile worshipers of God all over the world, ready to tell us about the God they have encountered.

David That's right, Jose. 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 should 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 supernaturally at work in their lives, in the way the Bible promises. We are not voting on whether you believe their claims, since many of us haven't had a chance to interview them yet. This is only a vote on whether the evidence is claimed.

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 asks if you don't mind waiting a few minutes so she could 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 Christianity is the only major religion that claims its main prophet rose from the dead, 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. He was on the other side of the grave and returned.

Sandra She says she already knew that but wanted to hear it again to make sure, since she doesn't have much time left.

Then Sandra gasped with excitement and said, are you sure?

Sandra Mary asks . . . (Sandra choked up for a moment.) She asks if someone would be so kind as to move some plywood pieces over here and lay them between her and the pillars.

A few in the crowd clapped. David wasn't sure why she asked this, but three men from the crowd were already running to pick up some plywood and place it by Mary. She drove her wheelchair 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 rushed to embrace her. Then she whispered something to Sandra for the whole crowd.

Sandra Mary says she believes in Jesus now 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 each and 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 seems to be 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. 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. 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 far away land, there lived a King. He loved the members of his kingdom and ruled with wisdom, justice and kindness. 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 cen-

tral 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, a city named Terra was visited by an outsider. He spread half-truths about the King and convinced this city 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 quickly grew worse. They lied, stole, lusted, slandered, and hated, eventually degenerating into violence and adultery. The whole city was infected.

When the King returned to visit, he was appalled. Because Terra was in open rebellion, he removed the tree of life from the square. Then he withdrew until he could restore the city to its former condition, if not better.

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 saw dying as normal. Those born after the rebellion had never known anything else and didn't know immortality was possible. They saw themselves as noble and courageous as they faced death with dignity, not realizing it was the King's punishment.

Eventually, wrongdoing seemed normal. They sensed that they shouldn't act so badly, but they ignored their conscience since everyone had practiced the same behavior for as long as anyone could remember. What consoled them were a few horrid villains who kept the rest feeling good about themselves 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 the wrong they had done. They assumed he was like them and didn't mind evil too 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 to make it happen. 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. "Do you know 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's 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 Champavati. "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."

Champavati replied, "Are you talking about that old story of the holy man who was killed?"

Peter went on, "Yes. This wicked city put its 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."

Champavati 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 a bit 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 live by his word."

"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 miraculously 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 here?"

"No one knows, but it could be soon."

Lien's eyes widened. "What does the Prince ask of me?"

"Love him with all your might, do his will, and keep a clear conscience."

"What does that look like?"

Peter continued, "Love your enemies, pray, and shun evil. Hope in his coming. Curb your tongue, submit to authorities, and use your money as it pleases the Prince."

"Will it be hard?"

"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, very great. The Prince's Spirit will come to live within you to strengthen you. Ask the King anything in his Son's name, and he will do it for you. When you join yourself to 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 not yet seen."

Buoyed by their experience with Lien, the two chose to talk to someone else. They saw a man named Fujita 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."

Fujita countered, "I have read about the Prince and respect him. As for this city, it is pleasing to the King and is getting better all the time."

Peter disagreed. "Many of the people we talk to despise the King and his message."

"That is because your message is too unyielding. Soften it a little. 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."

Fujita 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."

Fujita began to leave while saying, "Sin is an outdated idea. I have a comfortable home up there on that hill. I just added a new deck with a lovely view of the valley, and I expect to enjoy it 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 the two of them 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 assistant 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. This 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 getting nearer, at which time he will utterly destroy this city and build an exceedingly better 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 in our place. 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."

"Your whole 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 as suits your fancy because there is no fear of the King in this place."

The Mayor's assistant said, "You disciples of the Prince think you are so holy. Just the other day I saw one of your people enjoying himself at the public games."

Abe declared, "As for that man, the Prince will decide his fate when he arrives. But you convict yourself by admitting 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. She has changed and no longer does what is disgraceful, bringing great joy to the King and his entire court. All his true 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 watch and among them was one named Kakumulani. 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, Kakumulani's drinking companions approached him and asked, "Was that you we saw standing with those believers? You're not one of them, are you?"

Kakumulani laughed. "Certainly not. I was only walking past them."

His friends said, "We'll see you at the party tonight, won't we? 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 much 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 sitting in jail by then."

"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 proclaimed, "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 everyone to abstain from anything that pollutes body and spirit, so as not to jeopardize his welcoming you. Be ready, so that when he comes he will find you carrying out his wishes and not indulging your pleasures. Remember the sacrifice the Prince made on the cross, how he purchased us with his own blood. The glories of the age to come are exceedingly great, so know that your labors bring a reward."

After the meeting, Abe and Peter approached Kakumulani. "We have heard reports that you have been unfaithful to the Prince."

Kakumulani 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."

Kakumulani balked. "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 little regard for how he appeared to the King."

Next, Abe and Peter brought with them a sister in the faith and confronted one named Juanita, a member of their group for years. "Juanita, with the Prince's coming drawing near, 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, such as fits of anger, foul language, and grumbling."

Juanita said casually, "I'm not proud of those, but it's all right because I believe 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 gives us time to turn from sin, 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 Kakumulani, 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 Julius and told him, "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. Recently, 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 had some qualms with how the meetings were being run, and on top of that someone said some terrible things to me."

Abe pleaded, "My friend, you are trapped in the sins of bitterness and unforgiveness. Confess these transgressions and reconnect yourself to the Prince's servants. Otherwise you will keep wandering farther away from the Savior."

Julius said, "I'm not worried. Now if you will excuse me, I have several projects going."

As they left the house, Peter confided, "I think my heart will break. How can I endure seeing one who shared our hope drift away from the truth?"

Abe added, "I feel the same about all who linger beyond the fringe of the kingdom, like Kakumulani and Juanita. But we must stay strong for the sake of those who truly want to be saved."

A number of days later, Peter awoke first thing in the morning and sat on the edge of his bed. Suddenly, he felt an inexpressible peace and joy. At once he knew he should go directly to the city gate. As he crossed the city, he saw Terrans starting their day as usual. They were planning business ventures, marriages, 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 trained 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, surrounded by a large army. The believers broke into a dash toward the Prince. Even the aged found themselves running as if their youth was fully restored.

The Prince and his army raced down the mountain side until he met his bride in the plain below. Their joy cannot be expressed with words. They led him 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 there with part 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 for years. 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 was rudely awakened as she was also hurled into the

jail. Following her through the gate was Kakumulani, the hypocrite. He was a little anxious, but was gambling on a good outcome. However, 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 Ter-ran 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 someone. It was Tebogo, who had delivered Abe and Peter from the stocks. Ever since that time, he had been longing for the Prince's appearance. Tebogo was joyously 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 escape. The Prince's soldiers grabbed Omar, the mocker, and Champavati, the offended. Fujita was dragged from his beautiful house on the hill, the one with the new deck and pleasant view. The Magistrate and his aide were hunted down and captured, their reign brought 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 had been waiting for a better city.

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 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 the city overlooked the transformed plain surrounding it. Now the believers began to see that their new home would be far superior to the original Terra.

The Prince led them inside to the restored 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 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'll 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 Great 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 exactly that. He sent his Son, who proved himself with many miracles. 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, and they got thrown in the dungeon.

Paul Christianity has a two-thousand-year history of God's spokesmen being beaten, jailed and killed, starting with Jesus. How can you complain that God didn't do more to warn you?

Liz It's a fantastic offer. A new body. A place without pain and death. Eternal life. This is what we've been searching for. Why would anyone in their right mind refuse?

Karl The offer was clear enough, but what is our part? That wasn't so clear. They used a lot of different words to describe it.

Liz Give God everything you have.

Geoff Are you sure that's right? Won't God forgive me if I don't give him everything?

Jose Why wouldn't you want to give him everything?

Geoff It's not that I don't want to, but . . . well, you know it's hard. I think that's asking too 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 Theologians have discovered for us that the Bible says we're not able to give God everything we have.

David Somehow I missed that when I read the Bible. I bet those theologians are very popular.

Karl Did the story really represent the Bible's message?

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, felt compelled to speak out.

Robin It didn't sound like the gospel message I usually hear. This was too severe.

Paul The gospel you hear may have been warped by sinful men. If this world is filled with rebels, as the Bible claims, wouldn't you expect them to slant the message to their advantage?

Robin But I've heard this gospel from kind and honorable men.

Paul They tell you God loves us all and would never punish us. Everyone is happy. The only problem is that the Bible doesn't agree.

Latisha I don't like all that fire and brimstone stuff. Can't we focus just on the pleasant 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 And what if I tell you, "Nah, I'll pass. You guys go ahead and have a good time. I'm fond of my vices."

Latisha I'd tell you it's some good stuff, and you should try it.

Anna That is bizarre, Latisha. God is going to suddenly appear, burn down our homes, and throw us in a dungeon forever, and you wouldn't say one single word to warn us?

Latisha I don't like to be negative.

Karl At least the Bible doesn't make that mistake.

Anna You know, you are right.

Latisha I felt so bad for those poor people going through the gate at the end of the story. They thought they would be entering paradise but were jailed instead. Isn't God merciful?

Sandra You can't arbitrarily change God's terms based on your sentimental feelings. You may want to lower his standards to let more people into heaven, but don't make the disastrous mistake of assuming that God will follow your lead.

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 doesn't mind as much now since Jesus keeps forgiving us.

Geoff That's right. The fear of God is only for the Old Testament.

Paul You two have been conned. Why were you so eager to latch onto that false gospel? An unbiased study of the whole New Testament would have shown you the truth.

Latisha With all that 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 rottenness has seeped into the walls. Here comes the good news. The governor stands outside with a bull horn saying, "Come out of that den of thieves. Leave your life of crime and I will give you a full pardon with no time in prison. 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 has to be condemned, and we are not murderous drug dealers. There must be another way to understand the Bible.
- David That's the problem. This is exactly how the Bible portrays the world. It tells us one day Jesus will sweep in unannounced and bring a violent end to people's plans. This will be the horrible destiny of my neighbors who are living quiet lives, not bothering anyone. If there is one thing the Bible makes absolutely clear, it's that the wicked will come to a painful end, and the pages of scripture are littered with dead bodies so no one misses the point. Oh, and there will be a whole lot of people falling into the wicked category since most don't give God everything. My Sunday door-to-door visits confirmed this beyond any doubt.
- Anna Do you believe that?
- David That the Bible teaches this from front to back is a fact. Do I believe it? 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 that some people will live on in a splendid new world, while the rest of mankind suffers weeping and gnashing of teeth? It's too black and white, too all or nothing. It can't be true!
- 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? It's inconceivable.
- Karl But you already know most of the world is wrong. That's one of the things we've learned in our search. Do you now want to say everybody is right only because you find the Christian message too harsh?
- Anna I see the appeal of thinking everybody is right, no matter what they believe. It makes the future look much more pleasant.
- 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 make it go away? Why not listen to it and escape judgment?
- David How can you believe in such a cataclysmic end of the world? It is totally without precedent.

- Paul Not true. God's given us many examples of both his blessing and wrath in Scripture. What about the world-wide flood?
- David That's just a myth.
- Jose You're reverting to the pitiful arguments of the scoffer just 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 You did a few days ago. But now you've changed your mind because you don't like reality. Lots of people blame God for how the world is, but the more logical ones like you realize that doesn't make sense. So you vent your anger at him by saying he doesn't exist.
- David Fine. 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 Why is that God's fault? It is men who spread lies and men who ignore God.
- David What about my brother Samuel, and my mom? 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 mom and brother are, but I do know this. Your hating God isn't going to 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? Therefore, when someone like Jesus tells us how far we've strayed, it sounds so offensive that we murder the messenger.
- David That's impossible!
- Paul Now do you see why many are so eager to discredit the Bible? In the days of your namesake, Jeremiah, God threatened this same kind of judgment, but most Jews reacted in denial, like you. God did destroy the city of Jerusalem, killing many and dragging the rest to slavery in Babylon. That is a historical fact. Why repeat their mistake?

Liz David, what's the real problem? Do you think God will be unfair at the final judgment?

David What the Bible predicts for that day could never be fair!

Paul Is any man fit to 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 God is right.

When David heard this, he stormed out of the meeting 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 southeast. Twenty minutes later, he returned to his house. His mind was a little more rational, but he was still steaming.

I endured months of meetings, he raged. 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. Was this the battle of the will Paul told me about? No! There's no battle here. I won't come to God on these terms.

David's anger turned to depression. What was the point of continuing? He wanted to cancel the meetings. If others wanted 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 black 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 forty years. 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 prayers when I was little, but it was-*

n't like this, where it could really mean something. 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 any child could do. Finally, David knelt down, folded his hands, and began to open his mouth, but was afraid he might say the wrong thing. He tried again and at last 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 heading for bed when he noticed a small, smooth stone on his fireplace mantel. So 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. David went to bed.

The next day, Saturday morning, David decided as soon as he got up that he needed a break. Today there would be no thinking about the meetings, last night's discussion, or God. No reading the Bible, his first time off in weeks. It was a bright, sunny day and he had several errands needing attention. He had fallen behind in everything 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 of them said, "I've got to tell you about my friend. He went to check out this group that meets at some guy's house. It's called something like search for life."

"I heard they're all a bunch of self-righteous Bible thumpers."

"All I know is, it sounds boring."

"Those kinds of people make me so mad, thinking they are 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'd make me sing dorky songs."

"So did your friend say why he went?"

"He wants to make sure about going to heaven."

"I'm not worried. I've got my beliefs, and I'd never let anyone tell me what they should be. I figure if there is a God, he wouldn't be too concerned about every detail of my life. He's got bigger things to worry about. As long as I don't do anything really bad, I think I'll be okay."

"My philosophy is, 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 of them said, "Joan, whatever happened to that guy who took you out a couple times last month?"

"He wasn't the one for me."

"At this rate you'll never get married. Here you are in your mid-thirties and still single. If you don't watch it, you'll wake up someday an old maid and lonely."

"I haven't found the right one."

"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 agree with."

"I'm starting to see the problem. You don't want to marry someone else, you want to marry yourself. Isn't that the beauty of marriage? You don't clone yourself; you discover a whole new world."

"But it's so risky. How do I know I can trust a guy that much?" Joan gazed at the ceiling. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if there was a prince who came running 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 with me, protect me from harm, and never betray me. Neither of us would ever, ever grow old."

"Dear, I hate to be the one to break the bad news to you, but that prince doesn't exist."

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 neared a man sitting on a bench who was reading the newspaper. As David was almost beyond him, he glanced over and noticed a headline which said, "Search for Eternal Life Continues." He froze.

"Hello." David said. "I couldn't help noticing that article you're reading."

The man said, "It's a follow-up to an article a few months back about this guy who started some meetings at his house. He gets dozens of people to come and talk about heaven, or something like that. 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 has 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 right over there playing with our two daughters and our son. My problem is, I'm not too comfortable going to church, and I'm not sure if church is even the right place to go. But when I read this article, I thought this would be perfect for me. You see, I've heard a lot of conflicting opinions about the Bible and all that stuff. I want to do the right thing for my beloved and our three precious little ones. I was thinking of checking it out this week. Do you know anything about it?"

"I happen to know they've been meeting Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays."

"Great. Do you have any idea if they're going to keep meeting?"

"Ah, I . . . think they probably will be."

"Perfect. Do you go sometimes? 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 a ten-pound stone resting

on the fireplace mantle. The prayer! He had forgotten all about his feeble, four-word prayer, followed by meeting his own ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future.

It has to be a coincidence, he reasoned, but how can it be? Did one of those Christians spy on me and arrange it all? That would be impossible to pull off. Could it have been aliens? Come on, David, get a grip on yourself. I can't deny that 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'll have dinner, let my mind settle, and see if things look different later on.

Three hours later, David walked over and stared at the stone. It didn't look any different. He could make up all kinds of explanations, but there was only one that was reasonable. David began to be aware of something new and frightening, the presence of a powerful being in the universe, one who understands English and can direct his steps to a particular coffee shop, café, and park bench, but 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? Well, maybe it's 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 morning, David woke up and didn't feel too bad, considering his tumultuous mood the night before. After breakfast he had a crazy idea. Maybe he should go to church. That would be radical, seeing that he had never set foot in a church in his life. Was now the time to break his string? Some of his Jewish relatives didn't speak too kindly about Christians. He figured he owed it to himself to see if they really were two-headed monsters.

What time do they meet, and how should he 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 for churches with a worship service starting soon. He found one before too long and went inside.

Sitting down, he looked around at the people coming in. *What do you know, one head each.* The music was fine and the people were friendly. At one point a lay person stood up in front to talk about what God was doing in his life. 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. "Two men were crucified on either side of Jesus. Reading from the gospel of Luke."

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? 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 up at his 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. Yet, in a short time, one was in paradise. What a glorious ending. But the other was not. What a horrible fate. Why this tragedy? Why couldn't they both have been 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. He didn't agree with how Jesus was saving the world. The second acknowledged that his punishment was deserved and 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 galls you so much that you will not worship God. 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! Let God 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 God is right."

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 in the right. But he did so much more. He came after 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? God is in the right, 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. *What is going on? Is everyone in on it?* The crowd filtered out and 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.

God is right. 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 the church is run and how people get saved. It meant God decides what he wants to explain to us and what is left unexplained. Lastly, when God did all these things his way, then David must respectfully support it without any grumbling or hint of insubordination. Was he ready to declare God is right?

The pastor noticed David still sitting in the pew and came over to ask if he needed anything. David answered, "No thanks, 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 talk about in your message 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 of course I obeyed."

"What day was that?"

"Thursday."

"Are you making this up?"

The pastor was stunned.

David quickly apologized. "I'm sorry. That was very rude. Of course you're telling the truth. It's been a rough weekend."

The pastor, who was in his late fifties, reassured him, "No problem. I can see you are genuinely searching for the truth. 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 something."

"Why do you say that?"

"My name is David."

"Interesting. You seem to know your Bible. Do you get to church often?"

"Not too often," David said with a little grin.

On the way home, David stopped at a store and bought a harmless fiction book. He needed to escape reality for the rest of the day.

CHAPTER 18

Monday

The huge crowd slowly filled the seats. Everyone was wondering what would happen after the way the meeting had 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. A couple of awkward minutes 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 one time and I saw where you hide it. But I promise you, I never touched it, until now." 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's subjects delighted in their home, and he was like a father to them. Since the King lived forever, it went without saying that he shared his immortality with his children, whom he delighted in. In the King's realm there was a depression in the ground, a large and deep circular hole with steep cliffs on every side. The King instructed his children to never go down into it, or they would die. In spite of this, his children put more stock in their entertainment than they did in their Father's commands.

One day, with great anticipation, the children ventured down into the depression. From the moment they set foot in the canyon, their bodies

began to age. Because of their disobedience, the King laid a curse upon that hole in the ground. 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 just to survive, and in the end were rewarded only with death. Sickness, wild 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 began a pattern of disobedience, this race grew more and more rebellious. They attacked each other and experimented with perverse practices, not realizing the harm this brought. A few, who retreated into the jungles and mountains, where cut off from the rest of their race and lost all remnants of civilization, degenerating into primitive savages. The rest stayed together in cities, but lost all knowledge of their original homeland 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 comfort his weary feet. Another man came up the road and entered the haven. This man, named Joseph, 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 Joseph.

"Four things pushed 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 weary existence?"

"I have, but a hearty meal or a visit to the theater always quenched it."

"I used to think like that, but what if there really is more to life? The second reason I search is the other side of the coin. We long for a wonderful life. We are given a miserable one, filled with pain and ending in death."

Joseph remarked, "I try to find the bright spots."

"I also believed this was commendable, but then one day I questioned why I settled for that. It's as 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 condemned. Even so, death prevents us from keeping it."

"I wouldn't mind a better place to live. What is your third reason?"

Judah pulled out his timepiece and said, "Who do you think made this?"

"I don't know, but it shows evidence of great skill."

"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 Joseph.

"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 that evil should be stopped or the evildoer punished if he or she won't cease."

"That is only fair. What is your point?"

"My point," cried Judah, "is that we keep on doing it, with no sign of abatement. Doesn't that strike you as a bit of a problem?"

"I'd rather not think about it," Joseph said.

"Now put these four together. One, I desire a better life. Two, suffering and death make this world fit for the trash heap. Three, the design in nature points to the existence of someone greater than us. 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 could 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 lie down and give up so easily."

Joseph confided, "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 Joseph. The two of them arose and continued down the road.

As they walked along, Joseph 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 dent has ever been made in removing 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 Joseph 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 Joseph 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 town. 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 are turning 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 him and his immortality. He visited the valley floor himself more than once, enduring its stench for the sake of those who sought him.

A few days later, Judah and Joseph came across a man named Luke. Judah told him about their quest. Luke said, "I know who the Creator is."

Judah and Joseph were amazed and blurted, "How can this be?"

"He was here, down in the valley," Luke said.

Judah asked, "What do you mean by valley?" Luke explained all about the King's sun splashed paradise above, about the rebellion of his first children, and about the King's plan to bring their descendants into his new kingdom.

"Where is this new kingdom?" Joseph asked.

"The King appointed his Son to one day invade this canyon. At that time he will 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 live among his children once again."

Joseph's face fell. "We will lose our beloved homeland? The King will destroy all the places, traditions, and memories we cherish?"

Luke answered, "What you cherish has been soaking in the foul brine of wickedness for far too long. 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 can 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," exclaimed Judah.

Joseph said, "You go ahead, Judah. I've decided to turn back." Judah was in shock. He pleaded with Joseph, but to no avail. So Judah followed Luke, but Joseph 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 that valley below. Why do you allow such a cancerous blight to exist in the midst of your 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 valley, watching 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 along the road, which looked like signposts. "Have you ever noticed these before?"

Judah said, "I've seen them from a distance but never read them. I was told they are irrelevant for our day."

"They contain records of the King's previous visits to the valley. For many 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 Son has been drawing you to the Father all this time."

Luke announced, "We have arrived at the place by the canyon wall where the Son will 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 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 top of 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 with his words on it. Does this look new?"

"No." said Judah. "It is very 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 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 plainly that it was the King who 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 thought for a moment, then said to himself, "I know what I need to do." He leapt directly toward the pine trees, the voice of Luke rooting him on from behind. A thunderous noise poured over the top of the cliff, the sound of multitudes 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 for an instant Judah panicked as he realized he would not be able to climb it by himself. He cried out, "Lord, 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 slowly 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 thanked God.

David turned around and held up his hand to ask for silence. Between sobs and sniffles, David forced out these words: "God is right. God is right. God is . . . right! 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 quietness came over the crowd.

The quiet was broken by the rising sound of someone sobbing. It came from the back row, but it was not the usual weeping. These tears came from deep within a 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 whole crowd gasped as they immediately saw the resemblance. When David opened his eyes and turned 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 now was 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 up on a chair and shouted, "Listen, you wonderful people. Come a half hour early on Wednesday, and don't eat anything all that day."

"What is that all about?" David asked.

"You'll see."

Then a man approached David and said, "Do you remember me? I talked to you Saturday afternoon in the park?"

"Of course. I'm glad you made it."

The man said, "I only have one question. Are all your meetings like this?" All David could do was shake his head and grin. Then he saw Sandra hurrying to her car and called, "What's the rush?"

Sandra kept moving and yelled, "I can't wait to tell Mary."

Next, Hank walked up, got right in David's face and said, "I'll be watching you."

"What does that mean?" David said.

"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 added, "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 here."

"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's eyes pored over 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 concluded.

"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 built by the group 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*

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 an announcement. Mary passed away this morning. She didn't say so, but I think she was hanging 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 will still be able to someday. It may even be next week.

David That's right. I have to get used to a whole different way of thinking.

Sandra Mary also gave me a letter to deliver to Barb. Mary asked her to reconsider, so she can see her in the kingdom of heaven someday.

Latisha Well, what do we do now?

David There are only a few pages until the end of the book. My guess is that there is only one more story.

Karl David, this was your baby from the start. You carried it on your back, and we are grateful. But now 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. This is way too important.

Liz I've got an idea.

Jose What is it?

Liz Maybe it wouldn't work. 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 invited them to bring their objections and we try to answer them.

David I like it.

Liz But I was thinking we could pitch the tent in the downtown park. We'd get a lot more people showing up.

David I really like it.

Paul Wait a minute. I know this apologetics group that travels around doing debates on this very topic. Maybe we could get a couple of them to come into town for a few weeks and help us.

David Boy, 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 named Evan stood up in the back of the crowd.

Evan You won't have any trouble getting permission from the fellow who issues those permits.

David Why do you think so?

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.

Elliot But it won't be like this.

- David Of course. Would you do me a favor? Some of you came as Christians and some became Christians. We know where those people are at. Others stepped off the path along the way, and our hearts go out to them. I would like to hear from you who haven't made a decision yet. It would give me some peace of mind, but if you don't want to share, that's fine. Please be honest. That has always been our style here.
- Karl I'll go first. I joined this group because I'm David's friend and I figured it might be intriguing. I got way more than I bargained for. I'm close to becoming a Christian, but I do things gradually. If I convert, it won't be like David. Actually, I don't think anyone's conversion was ever like his.
- Jose When I started here, I had a lot of misconceptions about religions, including Christianity. I learned a lot. This may shock you, but I know the Bible is true. So why am I not a Christian? It's one thing to know where the door is. It's another thing to step through it. Let's just say I've got some personal issues holding me back.
- Anna I can echo what Jose said about misconceptions, and I learned a lot too. I'm not sure about the Bible yet. What it promises is breathtaking, but what it threatens is dreadful, and no middle ground is allowed. I'm still sorting a lot of things out.
- Elliot Many of you are probably wondering why I bothered coming here. You may not believe me, but I came for the same reasons as the rest of you. I was seeking the truth, and I've got some different perspectives now. I still don't think the Bible happened as written, although I suppose I could change my mind some day. I might come down to the park. If I don't, it's been a pleasure, and thanks for putting up with me.
- David Anyone else want to share?
- Elliot Come on, Tyler, fess up. You're on the verge of joining a monastery, right?
- Tyler I'll pass, thank you.
- David Thanks for sharing. I understand you need time to process this. Just don't put it off too long. Life flies by pretty fast, and suddenly you've got little time left to find God. Right, Hank?
- Hank Don't get me started.
- David You are all released from the covenant. Please accept my heartfelt thanks to everyone who was faithful to the covenant, and to the rest who came and supported us. I could never have done it

without you. Keep your necklace if you still have it. I'll be leaving the post up in case you still want to use it. I guess that's it.

Karl stood up, and someone handed him a jumbo sized greeting card.

Karl Hold on there, big boy. We'll be done in a minute. Regardless of where our beliefs eventually land, I think it is safe to say that 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 have 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. Written across the top in gigantic letters it said, "Thank You 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?"

"What?"

"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 long 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 those things again. I wouldn't want to go through that process every week."

"Don't you have classes to teach?" Karl asked.

"Didn't I tell you? I took this summer off, and I'm glad I did."

Saturday morning, David and Ezra sat down over a pancake breakfast in David's kitchen. David said, "It's hard to believe what has happened in the last week. Just seven days ago I was at one of the lowest points of my life. I almost gave up."

"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 faith. Would you consider moving here and being my teacher? I'd love to have you live right here." 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 is like a drink of cool water in the desert. It refreshes the spirit of this old Jew more than you could 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 truly a week of miracles."

"I'd still like you to move here, Dad. You'll 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 could be no future for us until that changed, right?"

Ezra sighed, "As hard as that is to swallow, you are correct. You'll have to wait and see what happens."

"Waiting for a loved one to come to faith, that could be tough."

Ezra sunk his fork into his pancake. "Tell me about it. Say David, did you know that Wednesday after the meeting 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, like it pulled the Old and New Testament together for him."

"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 sure you were a lot of help for him, Dad."

"I invited him to join us at church sometime. 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 some 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 said with surprise, "How do you know him and Sandra?"

Just then Sandra walked up. "Hello, David, Mr. Ruben, Pastor Jesse."

"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 probably referring to the letters."

"Letters?" David said.

Sandra explained, "Soon after we began meeting at your house, I told a few friends here at church about it. Someone suggested we meet together to pray for God's hand to be on the meetings. So for the last few months we met every Saturday morning to pray, and Pastor Jesse joined us often."

David took two steps back, "You were praying every Saturday?"

Sandra smiled. "Then someone found out through the Christian grapevine that your dad was a believer. We thought he could join our prayers, in spirit if not in person. Someone located his address, and we exchanged a few letters. It was fun last Wednesday to finally meet your dad in person."

David didn't know what to say. Jesse added, "I don't think I'm going out on a limb by saying those prayers got answered."

"They did," Sandra said, "but several haven't made their choice yet. This thing is far from over."

David said, "Pastor, when I talked to you last Sunday, did you know who I was?"

"No, but after you told me your name, I was wondering whether you were *the David*. I was hoping I hadn't said something to mess everything up."

"On the contrary, you were perfect."

"Thank you. When Sandra told me about your new faith in Christ, I almost fainted for joy."

"But you don't even know me."

"You're my new brother. The great joy of all believers is to see people pass from death to life."

"Pastor, I'd like to talk to you about these park meetings we are 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 also joined them. Jesse asked David, "Would you mind praying 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 park 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, which gave them time to arrange promotion. Skeptics would be asked to bring their objections to Christianity. Every church in town would be encouraged to send their members for moral support. Someone suggested having free coffee, juice, and donuts. Jesse thought he could get a few churches to pitch in and cover the expense.

Ezra said, "I have an idea. The debates start at seven, but wouldn't it be great if all the Christians could meet in the park beforehand, say from six to seven?"

Jesse commented, "It would be good for church unity, like the book of Acts, all the believers together."

David looked right at Pastor Jesse. "All we need is someone to lead it."

"Me? I don't see why not. When we invite the churches, we will ask Christians to come at six o'clock if they can."

"And invite them to come for the Saturday morning prayer meeting," Ezra said.

"You're going to keep doing that?" David asked.

"The most important person we need at those park meetings is the Holy Spirit."

"Like the Trainer in that story," David said,

After the planning meeting, David asked Pastor Jesse if he would be willing to disciple him. Jesse said he would be honored, and they planned to meet Saturday mornings for an hour right before the prayer meeting.

After David, Ezra and Sandra left, Paul mentioned to Jesse, "That David could end up being a powerful evangelist."

"Most of the great evangelists in the early church were Jewish," Jesse replied.

"I just hope he remains loyal to the faith."

"Why, do you have some reason to think he will drift away?"

"No. David is as sincere as they come, 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."

"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 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. During the message, the speaker talked about the group's founder, whom they called "The Prophet." After the meeting, Latisha told one of the regulars how much she enjoyed their group. "Everyone here is so friendly and seems very sincere. I liked the message since it was based so much on the Bible."

"Thank you," said the woman. "God endowed our prophet with a unique understanding of the Bible."

"God sends prophets all the time," answered Latisha. "I can add what yours is saying to what the rest teach. I like to mix and match what I hear from different places."

"God has sent many prophets, but their messages get confused over time, and this is why God sent our prophet, who alone can return us to the truth. We hope you come back."

"I was going to this other group three evenings a week, but now that's over. I'll see if I can get my husband and daughter to come here."

"Wonderful," the woman said. "If you look deep into your heart, it will tell you that we are the true church."

The next Saturday, David met with Pastor Jesse for his first discipleship session. David started, "I hope you don't mind, but I've already accumulated over a hundred questions I'd like to ask you."

Jesse chuckled. "Over a hundred. That's funny."

"I'm serious." David produced a three-ring binder with several pages of questions. "I was hoping we could get through at least twenty-five this week. Don't worry; they're short. On this other sheet I've listed my vices. I expect you will want to help me get free of them. These are only the ones I'm aware of. Let me know if you notice some I missed."

Jesse had an incredulous look on his face. David asked, "Isn't this what you do with all new Christians?"

Jesse rolled his eyes upward and mumbled, "I wish."

At the end of their meeting, David mentioned to Jesse. "I thought I saw Owen in church last Sunday."

"He's been attending here for several years. I know him well."

"He sure knew a lot about Christianity."

"Yes, he does know the right answers. I think he respects you, David, so I may enlist your help in getting through to him."

"Why, what's the problem?"

"I'll let you know when the time is right. So, are you nervous about the park meetings? They're only a week and a half away."

"When I started the meetings at my house, I was on my own, except for Karl. Now there are a lot of people sharing the load. The best part is, now we are working for God."

CHAPTER 19

Wednesday

Eleven days later, David and his father arrived at the downtown city park at five thirty. It was a hot and sticky night. The location was ideal since it was right by downtown and there was a constant stream of people crossing the park. A ring of large oaks lined the perimeter. David's tent was pitched right in the middle of the park and was fitted with a stage and public address system. At six o'clock the Christians were scheduled to meet at a picnic shelter two hundred feet away from the tent.

At five forty-five 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 Paravasu. Kevin explained 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 told them, "Wow! I didn't know you could get a college degree just in that subject."

Troy replied, "There's a lot of material on that topic. It's a pleasure to meet you, David. We've heard what's been gone on here. Paul, do you have any idea how many will show up?"

"No, but we advertised all over town and in every church that allowed us."

Soon, people streamed in from all directions for the gathering of Christians, over a hundred of them. Some had been at David's meetings, but others were new. They came from churches all over the city, and even from 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 readings, and people sharing what God was doing in their lives. The second

half hour was designated a social time so people could visit. Many brought their 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 tent. The organizers were pleased to see three hundred people taking their seats. Behind the seating area stood another fifty spectators who were passing by and had stopped to briefly listen.

David mounted the stage to make an opening announcement. "Good evening. Welcome to a continuation of the search for eternal life. Our three guest speakers will take turns fielding objections to Christianity. Why are we here? This is a mutual search for truth, and we hope participants from both sides see it that way. The first person who signed up ahead of time may come forward to pose your topic."

The first challenger stepped up to the microphone on the stage.

Challenger You Christians say that when you die, your body will be transformed into something totally different. Do you expect educated people to believe such a fairy tale, which is totally without precedent?

Paravasu There is precedent. It has already happened to every one of us twice.

Chall Is that so?

Parav The first time was when you were created in your mother's womb from nothing, and the second time was nine months later when you were born. Both of those events are no less significant of a transformation than what the Bible promises believers at death, and both times our condition improved greatly. Resurrection is simply a third step.

Chall We know those happened. What does that have to do with resurrection, which no one has ever seen?

Parav People *have* seen someone resurrected.

Chall Well, I've never seen it. You Christians are always warning us about God's coming judgment, but the world keeps going on year after year. When's it going to happen?

Parav It has already happened. The history of Israel records many instances when God carried out his judgment. The most dramatic example was when he exiled the entire nation of Israel twice.

- Chall How do we know this so called final judgment will be fair? Maybe God will get up on the wrong side of the bed and decide to send us all to hell.
- Parav It has already happened. The Bible lists numerous examples of God rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked with complete fairness. Furthermore, we know this from the word of an independent party, an auditor if you wish. That would be Israel, who recorded for us how God dealt with them.
- Chall You say those things happened. I say they didn't.
- Parav What you or I say doesn't matter. The nation of Israel says it happened.
- Chall You Christians keep promising that one day Jesus will suddenly come from the sky in bodily form. That's absurd! The world's been here for millions of years, and no one has appeared from heaven.
- Parav It has already happened. Jesus did appear in bodily form two thousand years ago. Men touched him and ate with him. His first coming was physical, just as his second coming will be. That he came from heaven was proven by his sinless life and miracles.
- Chall But what you predict for his second coming will have a lot more fireworks than his first. Did that ever happen?
- Parav Certainly. Read the book of Exodus where God delivered his people out of Egypt with ten very dramatic plagues, topped off by the parting of the Red Sea.
- Chall And we're expected to believe that when Jesus comes, he will end sickness and death, something no one has ever been able to do?
- Parav He already did it. Jesus healed multitudes and raised the dead at his first coming, proving that he will do it at his second coming as well.
- Chall You sound like a broken record.
- Parav Everything God promises for the age to come, he has already done, including live right among us. For example, God promises a home for his people, and he already did it. He gave the Hebrews the land of Israel, after clearing out the Canaanites. In the same way, Christ will clear the Earth of those who don't believe in him, giving it to the saints. Have you heard the expression, "The meek shall inherit the Earth?"
- Chall What you are proposing for Christ's second coming is on a global scale. Surely you cannot say that ever happened before.

- Parav What you described is exactly what happened in the flood of Noah's day.
- Chall Do you expect an educated person to believe that story, when it's all based on one book? If the whole planet was buried by a flood, wouldn't you think maybe, just maybe, one other person would think it worthy of mention?
- Parav It is a historical fact that legends of a great flood exist in dozens and dozens of ancient cultures spread over six continents. The legends differ in details because they were passed down orally, but most of them share the theme of the world being destroyed by water as punishment, with a few people spared. Many also share details like a boat, pairs of animals, and a bird sent out from the boat. This is the common memory of the world's tribes, from every corner of the globe.
- Chall Those are just myths.
- Parav You asked why anyone else didn't mention the flood. In fact, people all over the world have mentioned it.
- Chall You said it was passed down orally. Those stories could have been corrupted twenty times during all those years.
- Parav These tribes had absolutely no contact with each other for thousands of years, not until recent centuries. Are you claiming that, coincidentally, their myths all transformed into the same basic story?
- Chall It's possible.
- Parav 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 all six continents—the creation story. Although details differ, most have these common elements. The first people 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 the earth's family history, passed down to us through the centuries by our forefathers. They were there; we were not. Any chance they might be right?
- Chall No chance.

A new challenger came to the microphone with a different topic.

Challenger I'm sorry to have to bring up this topic, but this is being promoted as a sincere search for truth. Your Christian faith stress-

es the highest standards of integrity, love, and other virtues. Is that not so?

Kevin You are correct. The Christian code of morality is second to none.

Chall And is it true that Christians are obligated to apply this morality diligently because it was given by God?

Kevin Yes.

Chall Then you have a huge inconsistency to explain, because the history of the church is filled with horrendous violations of the Christian moral code. We can all name those who claim to be Christians, yet their lives deny everything your faith teaches. How are you prepared to explain this glaring contradiction?

Kevin You sound pretty worked up about this.

Chall You bet I do. Apparently you don't mind people who brag about their church attendance, but stab you in the back as soon as you leave the room. Most people find this intolerable.

Kevin I believe these types are called hypocrites. They don't practice what they profess.

Chall Are you going to attempt an answer?

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. A large percentage of the Bible is devoted to rebuking those false believers.

Chall Are you telling me God hates hypocrites more than I do? Aren't you guys always saying God loves sinners?

Kevin God loves it when sinners repent—when they stop being hypocrites.

Chall If God is so opposed to hypocrites, then why is his church filled with them?

Kevin This is because of God's mercy. He is giving them time to repent, or change, so they won't be swept away in judgment.

Chall I think he's being a little too lax.

Kevin You want God to accelerate his time-table of judgment?

Chall No, but I would like people who call themselves Christians to act like it!

Kevin Again, you are in complete agreement with God on this point. He has spent thousands of years demanding this from those who profess to know him.

- Chall It doesn't seem like he's too worried about it.
- Kevin I can relate many stories from the Bible where God put hypocrites to death because they claimed to know him but kept doing evil. These stories are warnings for us. Believe me, God takes this very seriously.
- Chall You still haven't explained why the church has so many hypocrites.
- Kevin God loves them and is giving them a window of time to change, so they may escape the coming wrath. Are you complaining about God's mercy?
- Chall This is all a smoke-screen so you can avoid explaining their crimes.
- Kevin I don't have to explain their actions, because it's not my church. It is Jesus' church. You are laying the blame everywhere but where it should be laid. It is not our fault and it is not Jesus' fault. The blame lies upon those who disobey God. They are the ones who beat the prophets, killed the Son of God, and have been persecuting true believers ever since.
- Chall That sounds like an excuse to allow atrocities in your churches.
- Kevin We warn the disobedient, and if they won't repent, then we will have nothing to do with them. If by the end they still haven't stopped, God will see that they get what they deserve.
- Chall I'm not too impressed with the job he's doing.
- Kevin In most classrooms there are students who fulfill their assignments, and there are those who do not. A good teacher doesn't give up on the delinquents right away, but gives them time to become a better student. You demand they be flunked immediately. Believe me, hypocrites bother God far more than they bother you, but because his love dwarfs yours, he is willing to endure them for a season, to give them a chance to change their ways. Don't you realize that the same mercy God shows hypocrites is also giving you time to stop criticizing God and make peace with him, so you also can escape the coming wrath?
- Chall I haven't done anything wrong. Why should I be afraid?

After the meeting, David spotted his cousin Joseph leaving the seating area. "Joseph, wait up!"

"Hey, 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. He's pretty happy about it. Have you told any relatives?"

"Not yet, but I'm planning on writing a few letters. What do you think about it?"

Joseph said, "It's cool. When they talked about hypocrites, I thought about all the so called Christians in the Middle Ages who abused Jews. He mentioned how the Bible describes God punishing hypocrites, and I'm thinking, *good*. But then I realized those were Jews being punished in the Bible. Of course, the next question is, what about me."

"That's some honest thinking," David replied.

"Don't get too excited. I'm a long way from where you are. But I was thinking maybe I should read the Jewish Scriptures."

"Watch out. It'll change your life. Keep me posted."

"If I have to," Joseph said. "You know, you seem different. You're smiling more than you used to."

Friday, July 2

In spite of a light drizzle, scores of Christians came at six o'clock. David stood at the back of the crowd listening. A woman came up to him and said, "This is so cool."

"Are you from one of the churches?" David asked.

"I don't go to church, but I have strong religious beliefs."

"Interesting. Were you thinking of checking out Christianity?"

"Not particularly, but I respect everything you Christians believe."

"Thank you. Did you know that Jesus didn't leave open the option of being neutral toward him?"

"I'm not against the Christians."

"We appreciate that, but when Jesus returns, you are either on his side or you are his enemy."

The woman replied, "I don't like casting people into extremes like that. Why would you promote such a divisive message?"

"Because it's true, and I don't want anyone to be punished as Jesus' enemy. Neither does God."

"Jesus couldn't have taught that."

"I could show you in the Bib—."

"Not the Jesus I know."

"Those who heard him when he was on Earth wrote down what he said."

The woman began to depart. "I don't need that book to know what he's like. I've got my instincts."

At twenty minutes to seven, Jose showed up and found David in the crowd. "Jose, good to see you," David said. "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?" David cried.

"I've decided to follow Jesus."

David let out a shout and embraced his friend. "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?"

"You know how someone said that we need to give God everything? There were some things I wasn't willing to give him, but 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 tent meeting got underway. There were even more people than had come two days earlier. David made the introductions and invited the first presenter to come forward.

Challenger Everything you people say 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 listen to radio or read the newspaper?

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 just 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 thinking that the janitor is president.

Chall He's a very public figure.

Troy So was Jesus.

Chall This is irrelevant. The president is alive today, but Jesus lived two thousand years ago.

Troy So in a few 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 actually president?

Chall We have a lot more documented evidence about Washington than we have about Jesus.

Troy Really? I feel pretty safe in saying 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 at least twenty-seven separate New Testament books and letters written by his contemporaries. Do you know how many primary source documents exist that prove Washington was our first president?

Chall No.

Troy For all you know, it could be three. Obviously your confidence isn't based on eyewitness accounts. What's the real reason you're sure he was president of the United States?

Chall It was passed down by our entire country. Are you saying a whole nation could be wrong about its origins?

Troy You are the one saying a whole nation is wrong, the nation of Israel, who has told us in detail about the living God in their midst. Furthermore, the Christian church faithfully passed down the knowledge of their origins. So can you tell me any difference

between the evidence for my faith in Jesus and the evidence for your faith in Washington?

Chall Yes. Washington didn't claim to be God.

Troy That's only a difference in what the evidence points to. 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 evidences for your faith and mine are similar.

Chall You can't prove that someone didn't fabricate those stories a couple generations after Jesus lived.

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. Right afterward, his followers also performed public miracles. How many of you could I convince?

Chall That's entirely different.

Troy In other words, you think no one would fall for it. If I couldn't dupe any of you with such a story about Kennedy, why are you so eager to believe it happened in the first century?

Chall It could have happened, and 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 are willing to go anywhere *except* where the evidence points. Do you think one of us is biased?

Chall So you must believe every ancient myth.

Troy No. Do you see anyone living twenty years among jungle tribes to deliver the message of Homer's Greek god's? Everyone knows they are fables and can be ignored. The Bible is at the very opposite end of the spectrum, grounded in history and demanding to be taken seriously.

Chall I'll never believe those Bible stories, no matter what you say.

The next challenger presented his case.

Challenger You people asked for objections, right?

Paravasu Yes.

Chall I want to be sure everyone is clear on that because I'm glad to oblige. You bigots are a bunch of arrogant, self-righteous hypocrites. You invent absurd rules, you spread lies, and you won't let

us live in peace. You demean women, hate anyone different than you, and start wars. We don't want you in our schools, our government, or our parks. Stay in your churches and keep the doors shut.

Parav You seem to know a lot about me. Have you been following me around?

Chall Cute. I'm talking about Christians.

Parav Then I presume your accusations are 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 many of them.

Chall I wouldn't be caught dead hanging around those born agains.

Parav Then who are you accusing?

Chall I told you, fanatical Christians.

Parav Who would be a non-fanatical Christian?

Chall Someone who blends in with the rest of the world.

Parav Did you know that this is one of the reasons that Jews have been persecuted throughout history? Their unique laws and unwillingness to give up their faith made them stand out. They refused to blend in with the rest of the world.

Chall And it was Christians doing the persecuting.

Parav On the contrary, God's people are always the ones receiving persecution.

Chall Are you denying that Christians in the Middle Ages persecuted the Jews or anyone else?

Parav Those doing the persecuting couldn't have been Christians. We can tell by their deeds, since true Christians never do such things.

Chall One of many lame excuses to explain away your atrocities.

Parav You make many accusations against people whom you admit you don't know. Have you ever sat down and talked with them about their faith?

Chall They are fanatical Christians, so I already know what they are like.

Parav You despise them from afar only because they belong to a particular group. I believe that is called prejudice.

Chall How dare you accuse me of prejudice!

Parav Look over here in the audience, where most of the believers are sitting. Can you cite specific examples where one of them acted with bigotry, spread lies, or started a war?

Chall I'm saying Christians in general do that.

- Parav Have you considered talking with the Christians who actually do such things? That would be much more constructive.
- Chall I'm sure these are as guilty as the rest. I bet you guys are making a pile of money on these meetings.
- Parav We aren't charging for admission, we aren't taking an offering, and we are giving away coffee and donuts.
- Chall Do you deny that Christians use their faith to extort money from the gullible?
- Parav 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 to point out the error of their ways.
- Chall Very funny. I'll leave that to you guys. So you just won't admit to being full of hate?
- Parav I'm going to embarrass my colleague Troy, whom I've known a long time. 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 income 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 the help of your 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've heard these Christians warning us to be ready for Jesus' coming. I go to church, but I'm not exactly doing everything the Bible tells me to. What do you think?"

"I've done a lot of studying on this topic. All knowledgeable scholars agree that the Bible is filled with contradictions and was changed many times during copying. It's just the opinions of men."

"So I don't need to be concerned?"

"No," said the older gentleman.

"That's a relief. I was worried I'd have to give up a few things."

"Such as?"

"Uh, these aren't the kinds of things you mention in mixed company."

"Of course. I should tell you that I did study at a seminary."

"Then I know you can be trusted."

"Rest assured that 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 love—we know those are right."

"I guess that makes sense. Anyway, I like your message way more than theirs. I can have fun here, and still go to heaven."

"Doesn't that seem more like the way God should be?"

Sunday

The number of believers coming at six increased because that morning churches had exhorted their members to support this outreach. During the sharing 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 some dear friends. I had to give up the right to run my life as I please, but what does God give in return? Eternal life in paradise. Does anyone have a better offer? Now I can hardly believe it took me so long to get it. If anyone isn't sure yet, come and check it out."

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 that morning's newspaper about their tent meetings in the park."

Just then Liz showed up and said, "What was Jose doing up front sharing?"

"Haven't you heard? He finally answered God's invitation."

Liz let out a high-pitched scream and shouted. "When did that happen?"

"Just 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 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 is just curious. Maybe Mary's letter softened her heart."

At seven o'clock the first speaker took his position.

Challenger You base everything on the Bible, but the books of the Bible were picked by a small group of men in the fourth century. Why should I base my whole life on the decision of a few guys who lived centuries after Jesus?

Kevin You're talking about the New Testament, which is only one-fifth of the Bible.

Chall True, but it's the most important one-fifth for Christians.

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 the churches were using different books?

Chall There weren't any councils before the fourth century.

Kevin None that we know of, but what is your proof that the church was using different books?

Chall We don't know what they were using.

Kevin That is untrue, which I will show in a moment. It seems you have no proof.

Chall There were other books in circulation. They could have been using those.

Kevin Could have? Please produce your proof that the 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.

Kevin Is your wife present in the audience tonight?

Chall Yes. What is the point of all this?

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 formal 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. Using this evidence, it is a trivial matter to prove that the choice of 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 your proof.

Chall I can't because those books were suppressed.

Kevin So why do you believe it happened?

Chall Oh, never mind.

Kevin It would have been impossible to suppress anything because the New Testament books were immediately spread throughout the Roman world. The Apostle Paul alone wrote to seven different churches. It was centuries before there existed a central church authority that could have done any suppression.

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 have been added over the years as they are approved by three-fourths of the states. What if the wrong amendments got added? What if the ones we live under now were never approved, but were invented by a few bureaucrats who slipped them in when no one was looking? Does this seem at all likely?

Chall No, but that's totally different.

Kevin The New Testament books were selected by a public process, involving thousands of Christians spread throughout the Roman world. 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. Perhaps you don't want to obey it, so you are grasping for any excuse to discredit it.

A woman approached the microphone.

Challenger You are advocating the chance to live forever. When I was young, that would have seemed attractive. But now that I'm old, life has worn me out. I've had my share of sorrows and bitterness. What I'm trying to say is, I'm not sure I want to live forever.

Troy You are not alone in feeling that way. Death has an appeal, since it appears to offer rest from life's troubles.

Chall It's as if we all started out on a long hike. When we were younger we had lots of energy, and everything was new and fun. After a while the fun gets a little hollow. Eventually, all we can think of is sitting down to rest. We've tried life and know it won't get better. Then someone comes along and says, I've got good news, you can hike forever. I'm tired. I don't want to hike forever. I want to quit.

Troy Are you aware of what God promises for the age to come?

Chall Tell me.

Troy This is what the Bible says believers will experience: joy, safety, health, peace, abundance, each other, fairness, pleasures, fruitful labor, love, comfort, hope, singing, beauty, treasures, honesty, favor, prosperity, knowledge, purity, light, a home, responsibility, righteousness, rejoicing, community, strength, society, blessing, glory, vigor, honor, nourishment, purpose, refreshment, rewards, and—of particular interest to you—renewed youth and a Sabbath rest.

Chall That is an impressive list and I suppose I should be thrilled, but I've tasted good things and sooner or later they turn bitter, or I grow tired of them. If I could have everything my heart desires, it

might keep me satisfied for thousands of years, but I doubt the thrill would last for eternity. Young people don't understand what I'm saying, but as they get older they will.

Troy It's hard for us to picture the kind of life that would satisfy us for eternity, since none of us has ever experienced that. This is the only life we've ever known, and it's contaminated.

Chall Right. God offers a better life, but 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 capital city to reside with some relatives and eke out a living.

Living in the city, she began to hear about the King's Son, the Prince. There were many remarkable stories of his good deeds on behalf of his subjects, some from long ago and some from recent times. In every story, the Prince was shown to be honest, patient, dependable, untainted, 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, 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 she was amazed to find that the histories did not list a single incident of wrongdoing by either the King or the Prince. This matched what she heard about them from her friends who worked for them.

There was no lack of people who resented the rule of the King and his heir. They didn't like his laws, and they complained that more wasn't being done for them. Some used him for jokes and some for cursing. But when anyone was asked to give even one concrete example of a broken promise or of being cheated, they could not. Faults could easily be found among those who wore the Prince's badge, but when it came to the Prince himself, his reputation was blameless.

The young woman knew that 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?* Just as amazing was the fact that their goodness did

not diminish over time. What they were long ago is what they are today: perfect.

The young woman laughed as she said to herself, "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 usual place of employment. She turned the 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 that this was the Prince. He matched exactly the descriptions she had read in the histories and which had been told her by friends that knew him. His voice, appearance, and stature bore the unmistakable marks of royalty. Two thousand mounted soldiers were directly behind him. Not too many people come with an entourage like that.

The young woman was absolutely speechless. The Prince dismounted from his steed, came up to her, and got down on one knee. He gently took her hand and gazed into her eyes. She was shaking all over and barely kept herself from fainting. The Prince opened his mouth and said, "Beloved, (That was the woman's name.) I have come to ask you to be my wife. I love you and want to share my life with you forever. I am immortal and have the power and desire to share my immortality with those I love. On our wedding day, I will take you far away from this city with its corruption and pain, to live with me in paradise for all time."

At first Beloved's mind was numb, but she slowly regained her composure. "What will my life be like there?"

"I promise that it will be very, very good, and you will always be happy. Once you are there, you will never regret your decision. Beyond this promise I will tell you nothing more. You must trust me."

Beloved's mind started spinning as she thought of a million 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 replied, "Could you take me there now, so I could preview 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 you have never dreamed of. This proposal is about me. Will you trust me?"

Beloved reflected a little longer, then said, "I am not willing." She pulled her hand out of his, turned to the left and passed around his escort. With each step, her heart grew harder and darker. Her path went down some stairs. She misjudged the last step and her foot jerked underneath her.

The jerk of her leg caused Beloved to sit up in bed. In a few seconds she realized she had been dreaming. Then she began to berate 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 here that began to compare? Then she laughed about it. Such a fairy tale. Time to come back to her dismal reality.

Beloved got herself ready for work and left her home. Walking down the path, she pinched herself repeatedly. *I'm sure I'm not dreaming now.* She turned the corner and saw 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 cried out to the crowd. "Listen, all you people. I told you a piece of fiction, but God and his Son are real. They visited this world many times, and you can read the history of these visits 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. But here's the fantastic news: this offer is for real! It's no fairy tale. Now you know why Christians fan out over the globe, forsaking everything to spread this extraordinary news. This can 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 very back of the crowd, there was an old man with his face buried 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 found David up near the front. "Anna, you made it," David said.

"I thought I better show up since the whole town is talking about it."

"Did you hear? Jose became a Christian."

"Oh."

"What did you think of the program?"

"I assume you want to know if I believe it," Anna said.

"If you're ready to talk about it."

"My ride is leaving soon. I'm going with some friends to watch the fireworks, and we want to get a good spot for viewing, so I better get right to the point. It's too good to be true. Spare me the history lecture. I know all about the evidence; boy, do I know about it. I should be up there debating."

"What do you think becoming a Christian has done for me?"

"I can't see where it has hurt you. Even that temper of yours has toned down."

"What is it you really don't like about Christianity?"

"The black and white categories with no middle ground. Most of the world heading for awful judgment without knowing it. The outlandish promises like that ridiculous Cinderella story."

David said meekly, "None of those are faults if the message is true."

"That's a real big *if*."

"Yes, it's a big *if*, one we spent several months on. The reasons you gave are the same reasons Jesus was rejected by the Jews. They didn't find him guilty of wrongdoing. They didn't expose him as a cheat who faked his miracles and conned his disciples. They simply didn't like him and his message."

"Well, maybe if he were here today I wouldn't like him either."

"Whether you like him or—"

"I know, I know. It doesn't matter what I like; it only matters what is true. I'm telling you, David, something that repugnant can't be true. My ride is waiting. See you around."

CHAPTER 20

Wednesday

David and Ezra arrived at the park early to meet with several others to pray for the meeting. David said, "I've got something interesting to tell you after we pray."

"Is it quick? Tell us now."

David told them, "This afternoon, someone tossed a rock through my window. It had a note tied to it. They aren't too happy about what we're doing here."

"It wasn't the big picture window in your living room?" Karl lamented.

"That's the one," Ezra said. "Fortunately, we weren't there when it happened."

David added, "Here's the weird 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 this is the same thing they did to Jesus and his disciples. Don't get me wrong, I'm not glad for the person who did it because this means they're an enemy of God, so I've been praying that they see the light."

Troy commended him. "You are an example to us, David. Christians never take revenge. We leave that to God."

Parvasu added, "That's how we know the true believers. Christians are always the ones receiving persecution, never dishing it out. None of us is

to speak a single disrespectful word about those opposing us, not even in jest."

During the corporate sharing time at six o'clock, a man named Tyrone gave this testimony. "I went to church for years, but between Sundays I did whatever I pleased. All that time, my church left me with the clear impression that my ticket to heaven was safely in my pocket. The pastor always spoke to the congregation as if everyone sitting there was pleasing to God and headed for paradise. They had no idea what I did during the week and didn't care. Not once did the pastor imply that any one of us might not be saved. When the church announced the death of a member, we were always assured that this person was now in heaven. All I needed to do was sit in the pew once a week, and when I died they would gladly send me to paradise as well. Thankfully, a friend of mine had the courage to point out what Jesus really taught."

At six thirty, David, Paul, Sandra, and Jose were visiting when Hank appeared. "Hank!" cried David. "What a pleasant surprise."

Hank looked Jose right in the eye. "I heard you repented. Any regrets yet?"

"Are you serious? My only regret is that I didn't repent a long time ago. I was way, way overdue."

Hank turned to David. "What about you, any doubts?"

"Yeah, I get doubts, but when I take a good look at them, I quickly see there's nothing behind them."

Hank said, "Just making one last check before I go public. I made my decision. I'm in." The mouths of all four dropped open.

Sandra said, "Hank, what do you mean by *in*?"

"I believe. I'm ready to follow Jesus. He's really coming back. When can I get baptized?" There was great joy in that little group as each took a turn embracing their new brother in the faith.

Paul said, "Tell us what happened, Hank!"

"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 of the crowd, and this cold heart was melted. He shed his blood for me, to wash away my lifetime of guilt. What more could he do to prove his love. I've known about that since I was five, but it took seventy years to really get it."

Jose grabbed Hank and said, "We've got to tell Liz. She will flip."

Sandra followed after them yelling, "Hank, turn down your hearing aid." Soon after they left, David and Paul heard a piercing scream from the other side of the crowd.

Paul smiled. "They found Liz."

At seven o'clock, a challenger came onto the stage with her objections.

Challenger You want objections to Christianity. I've got a lot of them, so stand back. I'll start with all the obscene things done by Christian nations.

Paravasu Excuse me. There used to be a nation of God's people, Israel, but now Jesus' new covenant defines only two groups of people. The first is all the nations of the world, which are under the power of the Devil and his Antichrists. The second group is the true Christians, spread throughout the world. There are no Christian nations, but there is one Christian Church. Don't be fooled by the fact that some nations in the past adopted Christian customs and terminology. This doesn't make them Christian, anymore than hanging a stethoscope around my neck makes me a doctor.

Chall You're going to let them off the hook just like that?

Parav They are not off the hook. Read the Old Testament prophets and the last book of the Bible, Revelation, to see the fearful judgments promised on all the nations of the world.

Chall Fine. I'll stick to the church. There are plenty of horrors done by those claiming to be Christians.

Parav Excuse me, but the topic of hypocrites in the church was covered the other day.

Chall Do you want objections or not?

Parav Yes, but we want objections to the Christian faith as defined in the Bible. We are not here to defend the actions of traitors and heretics.

Chall No problem. I'll stick with the Bible. Your message is full of hate. You fascists call us sinful and say God will punish us.

Parav Let's assume for the sake of argument that hell is real and that you are at risk of being punished. Then would our words be hateful?

Chall No, but that's irrelevant because the Bible is wrong.

Parav I propose we have a friendly discussion on whether that is the case.

Chall Okay, let's start with some of the ridiculous stories in the Bible: sticks turning into snakes, a man swallowed by a whale, fire falling from heaven, people being blinded by God, demon possession.

Parav What is your objection?

Chall This is all make-believe.

Parav You're saying those things didn't happen? Based on what?

Chall They are nonsense.

Parav I'm sorry, but I'm not following your logic.

Chall Why don't we ever see things like that today?

Parav On the contrary, miracles *are* seen today among God's people.

Chall See what I mean? How come it's only the Christians who see this stuff?

Parav Because God works miracles for those who believe him. The reason you don't see them is because you stay away from where God is working.

Chall I'm glad to stay away from your type.

Parav And that is why you don't see miracles. Do you have any other objections?

Chall Yes, the Bible has all kinds of laws about animal sacrifices, what you can eat, what you can wear, and so on.

Parav Some of those laws were just for the nation of Israel. What is the problem?

Chall They are bizarre.

Parav They seem odd to you, but how does that prove God didn't give them?

Chall Even the narrow-minded prohibitions in the New Testament are totally out of sync with modern understanding.

Parav Are you insisting that God must align with modern western culture?

Chall Look at all the people God slaughtered in the Bible. Is any enlightened person going to accept that?

Parav Your whole premise is that God couldn't be so different from us. If you never met him, how could you know that?

Chall Our culture is far more enlightened than the God of the Bible.

Parav Perhaps the God of the Bible is more enlightened than us, and that is why he seems so different. If mankind is corrupted by sin, our judgment would be impaired.

Chall I am not corrupted by sin.

- Parav Any chance that sin has tainted your ability to reason, so you might be wrong about that?
- Chall Not a chance. And here's another thing: there are people suffering from birth defects, sickness, and hunger. If God is so good, why doesn't he help them?
- Parav God has an absolutely fabulous plan to remove suffering and death from this world, but you are fighting his plan because you won't acknowledge the real problem, your sin.
- Chall I don't like his offer.
- Parav Why? It's a win-win proposition.
- Chall It offends me.
- Parav Are you saying the Bible isn't true because you don't like it?
- Chall The whole thing doesn't make any sense to me. If I were God, I would do it way differently.
- Parav 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 might do things differently than you would?

The next person presented his topic.

- Challenger I believe in Jesus and go to church. I think I'm going to heaven, 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, does not hate, prays in Jesus' name, worships the Father and the Son, endures hardship patiently, does good deeds, forgives, does not love this infected world, hopes in Jesus' coming, and loves God with his whole heart, soul, and mind and his neighbor as himself.
- Chall Are you saying I have to do all that to be saved?
- Kevin I'm not saying it. The Bible says 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 I just had to believe that I'm a sinner and that Jesus died for my sins.

Kevin What about all the other things Jesus and the apostles told us to do?

Chall That's not the gospel. That's, you know, optional stuff.

Kevin How did you happen to draw the line between the easy and difficult parts of the message and decide only the former is the gospel?

Chall Some theologians figured this out.

Kevin You've been conned.

Chall But they've been saying this for centuries. There's no way they could be wrong all this time.

Kevin That same reasoning keeps millions trapped in other religions.

Chall The Bible says all over the place that we are saved by believing Jesus' death paid for my sins.

Kevin No, it doesn't say that even one place. The New Testament does say over sixty times that we are saved by putting our faith in Jesus.

Chall Isn't that the same thing?

Kevin The New Testament uses many words, figures of speech, parables, stories, and examples to describe salvation. You have arbitrarily selected only one word, faith. Furthermore, you have latched onto only one aspect of that word, intellectual assent. It turns out that your selective definition of salvation allows you to keep on sinning.

Chall Don't you believe in grace? I know *that* is all over the Bible.

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. Are you saying that isn't good enough?

Kevin That was a good start. But if you search the Bible, you won't find the righteous described as those who said a sinner's prayer. What makes them righteous is that they started doing God's will, and continued 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 But I've been told many times not to try too hard to obey God because then I'd be earning my salvation and I'd be obeying in my own strength.

Kevin Does the Bible ever warn against that?

Chall There are a few verses that seem to imply it.

Kevin How many times does the Bible plainly tell us to obey God?

Chall Hundreds.

Kevin There's your answer.

Chall But I've been told that it's impossible to obey God, and if we exert too much effort then God won't be glorified.

Kevin Do you get the feeling that 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 Sure. It lists people's sins all over the place and says we are all sinners.

Kevin It tells us that sin is widespread. But where does the Bible actually teach that we cannot obey God?

Chall 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: 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 doubt God.

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 That's a good point. (A woman in the audience very loudly cleared her throat.) Oh, right. In answer to your question, seven. Definitely seven. No question about it. 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 theologians

invented clever sounding arguments. Some of God's enemies are outside the camp, but others snuck into the church.

Chall How can I know who is right?

Kevin Take an hour each day until you've read the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation. In each passage, ask only this question: What is needed for God's approval, and how can I 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 with a clean slate. Don't ignore the plain meaning of one passage because of a doctrine built on others. When done, summarize your notes to reveal the main themes repeated throughout the Bible. You'll be surprised when favorite doctrines are barely talked about, while seldom mentioned subjects are heavily emphasized.

Chall Study and take notes on every chapter of the Bible? That would 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 might be wolves in sheeps' clothing?

Chall Good point. I think I'll get started tomorrow night.

As the meeting broke up, David and Ezra were talking about it 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."

"He's spoken very highly of the school," Ezra said.

David told her, "Evelyn, why don't you come to the believers gathering at six o'clock?"

"My pastor advised us not to. He thought it was too divisive. Besides, I have my reputation at the college to maintain. So David, you decided not to take my advice."

David said meekly, "I had no choice, not if the Bible is true. What do you think of these discussions?"

"They've been intellectually stimulating, but I'm not sure what you are trying to accomplish."

"Turn people to God. Isn't that what your church does?"

"We don't tell people what to do. In our church, God loves everyone, no matter what their personal beliefs are."

"But that's not what Jesus sa—"

"I'm sorry, but I've got to run."

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 very hard for them to see why God would be displeased with them, since by the standards of this decadent culture they look good. If they would only study the Scriptures, they would see the problem. They don't long for Jesus' coming, but are quite happy with this warped world. When Jesus returns, they will be in for the shock of their lives."

Friday

Baptisms were scheduled to take place at six o'clock. A large tank was hauled in and filled with water for the occasion. As David helped get things ready, Karl walked up and asked, "Is it too late to sign up for a baptism?"

David had known his friend was growing closer and closer to the Christian faith but was still surprised. 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. This has been a gradual process for me. I can't point to one day when the light came on, but I do know it's the only sensible choice."

David was overjoyed. Karl handed him a small gift and card. David asked, "What is this for?"

"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 oriental man in his third year at Vanberth. He had become an atheist in his teenage years, but the love of Christian friends motivated him to investigate the claims of Christ. When he did, his atheistic arguments melted away in a few weeks. Jose also was baptized. He made a bold statement of faith before the two hundred believers assembled there. Finally, Hank was baptized. With tears on his face, 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 great joy and expectation. No one dared join them in

the park, unless they were honestly seeking God. The Christians were emboldened to share their faith with friends and family, and God kept adding to their number. All who joined them were welcomed as brothers and sisters, regardless of race or background.

It was seven o'clock and the challenger stepped onto the stage.

Challenger This evening, I'd like to discuss the many disagreements between science and the Bible.

Troy Very appropriate, since I studied science and engineering at graduate school. Which scientific viewpoint will you be comparing the Bible to? Today's viewpoint, the one from five hundred years ago, or the one from two thousand years ago?

Chall Why, today's of course. We know a lot more now than they did in the past.

Troy So if we compared the Bible to the scientific understanding of five hundred years ago, what disagreements would we find?

Chall Not too many, I assume, but that's irrelevant because we have corrected many errors since that time.

Troy So five hundred years from now, science will have found many errors in the science of today. That will make your comparison irrelevant.

Chall No, science will add to our knowledge, but they won't find errors in today's science.

Troy That's amazing! Can you tell me in exactly which year science stopped making errors and switched to only adding knowledge?

Chall Okay, future scientists might find a couple errors in our present scientific understanding, but not in the topics that contradict the Bible.

Troy Why would those topics have a special exemption from error?

Chall Because it's so obvious that science is right and the Bible wrong.

Troy If it's so obvious, why didn't scientists figure it out until recently?

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 Do you agree that the Bible contains accounts of miracles, claiming them as historical events?

Troy Yes, there are quite a few.

Chall Science maintains that those miracles are not possible.

Troy Is that so? I took many semesters of math, physics, chemistry, and engineering. I can't recall that ever being taught. Can you cite a technical paper that proves miracles are impossible?

Chall No one bothers talking about it in science books because it's understood.

Troy I see. It's an article of faith, not proven by scientific means.

Chall It's not based on faith. It's based on science.

Troy Then what calculation or experiment was used for the proof?

Chall There is none, but 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*, showing that they were never *laws* in the first place. All science can do is tell us that miracles are not typical, which everybody already knows.

Chall But miracles cannot be repeated by scientific experiments, so there is 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 I rest my case.

Chall If God wants us to find him, why doesn't he do miracles whenever people ask, to 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. Our real problem is our state of hostility against God's rule, and it is from this condition that God wants to save us. Giving us miracles on demand would only reinforce our rebellion.

Chall If miracles are exceptions to the laws of science, why hasn't science modified its laws to account for them?

Troy That would be my question for you because miracles have been witnessed throughout history right up to the present day. Why does science ignore these?

Chall Because they are proven to be fakes.

- Troy Only a small percentage has been proven to be fakes. Most cannot be explained by the secular minded, so they assume the witness altered the story, or they claim an unknown explanation. They unscientifically ignore any data that goes against their preconception.
- Chall Are you saying miracles should be included in the laws of science? That's crazy!
- Troy It only seems crazy because your peers have repeated this point of view for so long, not because it violates any scientific method. I could introduce you to hundreds of Christians who would describe miracles they've seen firsthand. This is valid scientific proof, but some scientists would never accept it because they decided ahead of time miracles don't exist.
- Chall Your beliefs are based on faith. Mine are based on scientific testing.
- Troy You believe in radio waves and DNA though you have never seen them. Others detected them, and you trusted what they told you. That is exactly what I've done, so what's the difference?
- 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.
- 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've accumulated your *evidence*? Do you have actual proof that millions of Christians are deceiving themselves, or have you assumed it based on what you've seen in a few people?
- 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 would be very rare.
- Troy A fact the Bible agrees with, for its miracles are concentrated in a few places, and those who witnessed them were astonished when they occurred.
- Chall There are other disagreements between the Bible and science. For example, why does the Bible say the sun revolves around the Earth? It talks about the sun rising and moving across the sky.

- 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 lots of other things in the Bible that science can prove are impossible.
- Troy The Bible is not a science textbook. It's a history book, a record of what the Jews saw and heard. Science possesses no time machine or any other measurement instrument that can prove a historical event did not occur.
- Chall I'll concede that since the Bible is history, science can't disprove it claims, including miracles. But there is one very big exception. Science has proven that all living things gradually evolved through purely natural processes. The Bible says God created all life from nothing.
- Troy Before we discuss that, I would like to note that the alleged contradictions between the Bible and science have been reduced to 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 informs us that the theory of evolution best fits the evidence.
- Troy Billions of people, including 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 we found evidence of intelligent, non-human life. In exactly the same way, theists look at the biological machines on planet Earth and instantly recognize that they were left here by an intelligent, non-human life—our Creator.
- Chall But the rest of us don't see scientific evidence for a Creator, so for us the Bible disagrees with science and therefore is wrong.
- Troy Maybe science is wrong. How many hundreds of times has science admitted its error and corrected itself?
- Chall Yes, science has been wrong a few times, but this one is as obvious as the Earth revolving around the Sun.
- Troy We can observe the Earth and Sun today. But when it comes to evolution, you are attempting to reconstruct what occurred a long time ago based on rocks and bones. This is far from obvious. You are putting a lot of faith in the interpretations of some scientists.
- Chall But you are also using faith.

Troy We are putting our faith in our eyewitness, God, who was at the scene when it happened. He is the ideal witness, perfect in knowledge and integrity.

Chall That's only if you assume the Bible contains God's words.

Troy Excuse me, sir, but nothing is being assumed. We have a group of people sitting in the audience who just spent months examining this very question, using a logical and rational process. As a result, many of them came to believe that the Bible 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 is always updating itself. Up until 150 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. My star witness says we were created, and a lot of scientists agree with him.

Chall So that's what you're taking your stand on, your so called perfect eyewitness?

Troy I'm staking my eternity on him.

Chall I'll put my faith in my scientists.

After the meeting, Paul said to David and Sandra, "Did you notice that every time Troy knocked down an argument that fellow would simply retreat to another one? Wouldn't you think at some point he'd consider re-evaluating his whole position?"

Sandra added, "I've talked to people like that. You can show them many errors in their beliefs, but it doesn't bother them since they are so sure they're right. It's very hard for someone with that attitude to come to the truth."

"They could learn from our humble friend, David, who was willing to go wherever the truth led him," Paul commented.

David pulled two gifts out and presented one each to Paul and Sandra. "I should have said this a long time ago. Both of you endured months at my house. Obviously, you came not for yourselves but to help others find eternal life. I cannot possibly repay you, but please accept this as a token of my heartfelt appreciation."

Paul answered, "The reward has been one hundred times better than the small sacrifice we made."

Sandra added, "God has used your search, David. Look at all the people who've come to Christ, and there may 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 will be difficult. I'll 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 large group met inside a church near the park. An elderly gentleman stood up to address them. "Thank you for coming to this important meeting, which I've been asked to chair. Look around you. We have people from many ideologies: atheists, agnostics, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists. The mere fact that we are gathered together in this common cause is tremendously encouraging. We all share a belief in the goodness of mankind and our limitless potential. We also share a concern over these meetings in the park with their narrow and divisive version of Christianity. The worst part is those who are being deceived and drawn into their group. Once they are brainwashed, there is no reasoning with them."

Someone said, "It's spreading because we look like fools out there compared to those Christian debaters."

"I don't think it's been that bad," someone else said.

"Have you been sleeping through the talks? We are taking a beating."

The chairman said, "They've been given too much from the secular flank. I suggest we send them challengers from a religious angle. Show everybody that these guys don't hold a monopoly on God."

"Whoever you send, you better coach them beforehand."

"We will," answered the chairman. "One other thing. This David Ruben is their darling, since this all started at his house. It wouldn't hurt our cause if some dirt about him was leaked to the press."

"I heard that he may get fired from his teaching position at the college."

"That will help," said the chairman, "but it could take weeks to be finalized. We need something right now."

Someone in the back called out, "I've got an idea. I'll talk to you after the meeting."

Another fellow asked to speak. "Mr. Chairman, my name is Frank and I'm a member of this church. Can I make an observation?"

"Certainly. All opinions are welcome here."

"Is it possible that they are winning the debates because their arguments are sounder?"

Someone shouted, "Whose side are you on? Are you one of them?"

"I'm not on any side. I'm just suggesting that they have some good points."

The chairman replied, "They are better prepared; that's all. We have people here representing many points of view. How can we all be wrong and only those extremists be right?"

Frank answered, "But we already know that many of you have to be wrong, because your views of God are diametrically opposed."

"What matters is that we live in peace."

"Are you saying it doesn't matter if I'm in error about God, as long as we all get along?"

"Don't you think that's what God wants?"

Frank said with exasperation, "According to you people, it doesn't matter what God wants, or whether he even exists."

"Thank you for your opinion, Frank, but we need to get on with our business."

A few hours later, the believers came together in the park. People in Ashbow were converting, including a number of foreigners. The rest of the town was taking notice, and taking sides. Some were getting agitated. Others took advantage of the crowd by setting up booths to sell food and souvenirs. As Ezra and David were watching the spectacle, Ezra told him, "I'm proud of you, Son. God is using you and your friends to make his name known in this city."

David said, "When we were meeting in my yard, there was a day when we were voting on whether to study Christianity in depth. The vote was very close and one person could swing it either way. I was strongly inclined to vote against it. That's hard to believe, but I didn't know then what I know today. Dad, your ten years of solid devotion to Christianity persuaded me to vote for it. I figured, if you stuck with it that long, it had to

be worth a serious look. If your example hadn't been there, all this might not be going on."

Sandra joined them and said, "David, remember when I spoke to you about Latisha? She's here and this would be a good time to talk with her."

"I'm ready. Dad, you've met her. Can you join us?"

The three of them found Latisha and asked if they could talk privately. David started, "Latisha, I truly appreciate your presence at the meetings all those months. I wouldn't be where I am today without you and the rest. We don't want you to miss out on eternal life and are concerned about your faith."

Sandra continued, "We are saying this in love. You've never hidden the fact that you mix your Christian faith with other religious views, and this is our concern."

Latisha was surprised. "Christianity is my main faith. I know that God loves me, and I love him. Isn't that all that matters?"

Ezra spoke up, "Latisha, my ancestors received the Ten Commandments from God and the first one says they were to have no other gods. Many Jews worshipped the God of Israel but also mixed in other religions. God's prophets called them adulterers because they were not faithful to their one true husband. When they didn't stop, God threw them out of the land he had given them."

"But that's the Old Testament. The New Testament is all about love."

Sandra said, "Did God once expect fidelity, but now doesn't care what lovers his wife pursues?"

"I suppose God wants fidelity, but he's forgiving, right?"

"If you know God wants faithfulness, then why not be faithful?" David asked.

Latisha became angry. "I feel judged by you three."

"We care about you, Latisha, and want you to be ready when Jesus returns," Sandra said.

"That could be a long time from now."

"That day already came for Mary."

"I don't think God is that demanding."

Ezra said, "I'm afraid the New Testament disagrees with you. The new covenant is different, but the level of devotion required did not diminish. Jesus demands all of us. "

Latisha snapped, "What are you saying, that if Jesus came today I would go to hell?"

David said, "That will be up to Jesus, but if you hang out with his enemies one day a week, you are taking a terrible risk."

"I really don't like what you people are saying."

Sandra said, "Your example influences your husband and daughter. Do it for them."

Latisha said, "I don't want to talk about this anymore," and walked out of the park.

At seven o'clock, the spectators were in their seats. By now there were five hundred a night, which had necessitated expanding the tent. A presenter came forward and introduced his topic.

Challenger Hello. I am a seminary graduate student. I would like to discuss how to interpret the Bible. Do you take the Bible literally?

Paravasu Only as much as I take you literally. Can I give an example?

Chall Okay.

Parav Tell me what you do to relax.

Chall I like to go down to the student lounge and hang out with some buddies. We play cards and crack some jokes.

Parav Everyone here understood what you meant. No one took *hang out* to mean dangling from ropes, and *cracking jokes* doesn't mean you use a hammer. The opposite of this extreme literalism would be allegorizing it to alter the meaning like this: To relax you stay in your room and ponder the mysteries of social interaction as represented by the symbolic buddies, jokes, and cards. No one tends to either extreme in normal communication, so don't do it with the Bible.

Chall So you don't take everything in the Bible literally?

Parav If you mean does the Bible employ 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?

Parav Most of the time you don't even need to think about it. It's obvious, like in the example I just discussed.

Chall That was a simple example. The Bible has many difficult passages which can be interpreted several ways.

Parav Let's try one. In the gospel of Matthew, chapter thirteen, Jesus tells a parable about a large fishing net that is dragged through the lake, catching good and bad fish. On shore men sort the fish, keeping

the good and discarding the bad. Jesus says this is how it will be at the end of the age, when the angels separate the wicked from the righteous, throwing the wicked into a fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Was Jesus teaching here that everyone goes to heaven?

Chall It could be, since there are many ways to define the words *wicked* and *righteous*. Perhaps he only meant that good will ultimately triumph over evil.

Parav This parable is clear, but you turn it into meaningless mush, just so you don't have to submit to the government of God. Do you really think God is somehow fooled by your manipulation of his message?

Chall To tell you the truth, I don't think Jesus really said that parable.

Parav You have a whole bag of excuses to pick from, all with the same purpose: Ignore God's commands and permit sin.

Chall Do you deny that people have interpreted the Bible in many ways?

Parav No. Do you deny that people have invented many ways of challenging and twisting God's word, just like the serpent in the Garden of Eden?

Chall You can say what you like. I think there are a lot of ways to interpret the Bible. It doesn't have to be only your way.

Parav If you are determined to treat God's instructions this way, I cannot stop you. Listen, all you people, anyone in the crowd who truly seeks God. Don't let the likes of this man deceive you. Don't put your soul in his hands. Read the Bible for yourself, and you will see that God has made himself clear. One day you will stand before him and give an account for your life. The empty arguments of men like this will not protect you on that day.

Another speaker moved toward the microphone.

Challenger I am a Buddhist. Thank you for this opportunity for discussion. I have heard that in your Bible God himself actually put some people to death. Is that true?

Kevin Yes, there are quite a few cases of that.

Chall Since you have asked for objections, this is obviously a major one because I find that barbaric.

Kevin Why? Are you against the death penalty?

Chall Yes, I am against it.

Kevin God disagrees with you. He believes in capital punishment, and he uses it, just like many governments. Are you denying God the right to choose his form of punishment?

Chall In some of those Bible stories, a lot of people died who couldn't have deserved it.

Kevin Are you accusing God of executing the death penalty where it was not warranted? That is a serious charge.

Chall My point is that God wouldn't act like that.

Kevin How do you know?

Chall It's obvious that no person has ever deserved the death penalty. Here's another objection. Doesn't your Bible teach that God told the Jews to capture the land of Palestine through warfare? And weren't they instructed to take no prisoners but kill them all?

Kevin Yes. Do you have a problem with that?

Chall Of course. Any nation that would do so today would be considered 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 completely in the right to forcefully seize back control of the entire Earth. How much more, then, does God have the right to recapture one piece, Palestine, 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 did with Palestine.

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 God's rule. If we forbid the ruler of the universe from using force to stop evildoers, then we condemn the world to the reign of criminals.

Chall It seems like the Bible isn't very loving. It's always warning about doom and gloom.

Kevin Have you ever had anything stolen from you?

Chall Yes, someone broke into my house and took some valuables. It was an awful experience.

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. One who intends you harm never warns you ahead of time. Yet God warns us all over the Bible because he wishes us to avoid harm. What you see as distasteful is actually love from God.

Chall Your faith teaches eternal punishment. How can you call that loving?

Kevin Are you angry about hell?

Chall When Christians insist on it, yes.

Kevin What if you read a story of a particularly ghastly villain? This scoundrel is guilty of the vilest acts against men, women and children. Ultimately, this thug meets his demise. Would this story's ending make you angry?

Chall I would think not, but that is different since that man got what he deserved.

Kevin There is no difference. In both cases justice is served. You are angry since you assume an eternal hell is unfair, accusing God of injustice. The truth is, his punishments are not arbitrary, and each one of us will get exactly what is deserved.

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 judge the world since he is infinitely more qualified than I. However, neither God nor I want anyone to go to hell. This is why we are out here, so men can avoid that terrible place.

Chall Do you really believe we will end up in an overheated cave ruled by the Devil, while demons stab us with pitchforks?

Kevin This is a misconception of hell that the Bible does not teach. God creates and oversees hell. At the end of the age, he will punish forever the Devil and his demons when he hurls them 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 ending, repeating endless cycles for all eternity?

Chall More or less.

Kevin The history of mankind is filled with unbelievable atrocities and evils. This continues today, as any newspaper will attest to. The 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 very soon bring evil to an end, forever. In its place, he will set up a superb world without a shred of violence and wrongdoing. It gets better! Every one of you is invited to live eternally in that new world, and God has appointed a man to get you there: Jesus, the Son of God. 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 God's Holy Spirit to lead you away from your evil ways. And he is the one God appointed to rule over the new kingdom, when he returns in the clouds with great power and majesty. Now you see why every 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.

Following the meeting, two important looking gentlemen approached David, who was chatting with Karl, Paul and Liz. "Hello, Mr. Ruben. We are on the city council." David and his friends 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."

"Thanks," David said, "but what should we watch for?"

"Just this afternoon a councilman at City Hall asked someone on the police force to dig up some dirt on David. They wanted to go public with it, but there was enough support in the council to threaten legal action if they went ahead."

"I'm very grateful for your help, but I wonder what policeman knows enough about me to have information like that."

"From what we could gather, it was someone who attended the meetings at your house. Did anyone there work for the police?"

The four of them looked at each other in disbelief, and Liz whispered, "Why that dirty rat."

One councilman departed, but the other said, "I've noticed Pastor Jesse leading your get-togethers at six. I used to go to his church."

"That's great," David observed. "Are you attending another church instead?"

"No, I get too 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 somewhere?"

"Earth is like France in the spring of 1944. There's going to be an invasion. All the institutions of men with their storied pasts and rich traditions will be wiped completely away."

"What?" exclaimed the councilman. "Our great nation and its culture, my alma matter, all gone? Why?"

"Because they're rotten to the core. The newspaper recently had a story of a house where someone died inside and wasn't discovered for two weeks. Try as they might, they could not clean the stench of death from that place and in the end had to bulldoze it to the ground."

"When will this happen?"

Paul continued, "It could be centuries, 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 will be there, and so will my family. It's scary thinking about the end of the world. Will the next world really be better?"

Karl jumped in, "Can I answer this one? I'm a new believer, but I've given this some thought. According to the Bible, this is what the age to come will be like. There will be no hospitals, fire trucks and cemeteries. No jails, armies, or weapons. Gone will be immunizations, lawsuits, funeral homes, and locked doors. No one will sing songs about their spouse cheating on them. No more crutches, seeing-eye dogs and cavities. Passports, border guards, and tariffs will disappear, as will all false religions. Jesus will be there, a ruler who will never be corrupt, assassinated, or overthrown—the ideal leader. No power on Earth can prevent this new world from appearing."

Most of them departed, leaving only Karl and Paul who said, "Karl, you'll be teaching other Christians before long."

"I owe it all to people like you and David."

"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 began with a flourish and kept going strong, but I've seen others who started like him, and their faith fizzled. Remember Cooper? I hope David is still as zealous for God one year from now, otherwise all that he gained will be lost, and his decline would have a negative influence on many."

Wednesday

Shortly before six, Jose and his family entered the park. They passed by a group of protesters who were carrying signs and chanting slogans against the Christians. When they reached the believers, Jose noticed a young man across the way standing by himself and staring at the Christians. He realized it was Tyler, and ran over to him. "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 this afternoon."

"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 him a eulogy. He went on and on about how Mr. Peterson is now strolling down the streets of heaven. This pastor was quoting the Bible left and right. I couldn't believe it. After 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 asked me, 'Doesn't the Bible say good people go to heaven?' So I told him, 'If you're going to use the Bible, then you need to use all of it.' He looked at me like I was from Mars. At one point, he commented that all religions teach the same thing, and boy did I tear into him for that. Finally I realized this guy believed whatever he wanted to, so I gave up. You know, at one time I looked up to Mr. Peterson, but as I walked away from that church I realized what he really was. Say Jose, I need to say something, but do you think you could keep it to yourself?"

"Of course."

"I wasn't very cooperative at David's house. I wasn't always . . . there for the right reasons. I'm sorry."

Jose smiled. "You're forgiven. What are you going to do now?"

"I'm not sure."

"Did you hear that I became a Christian?"

"Yeah, I did. Maybe you can tell me about it some other time. I am nowhere near ready to cross this patch of grass and join that group over there."

"I've been there, and it wasn't that long ago. How about in a couple weeks I give you a call and we go out for a slice of pizza?"

"That would be okay."

"And don't worry. I won't mention to anyone that we talked."

Tyler shook Jose's hand and said, "Thanks, bud. Catch you later."

At ten minutes to seven, Geoff arrived at the spectator 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 a woman stood up to present her objection.

Challenger Good evening, sir. My topic is how to rightly understand God's message.

Troy Do you believe the Bible contains God's message?

Chall I am a Christian. Your group encourages people to read the Bible for themselves, but that is risky. The Bible is complicated.

Troy What do you suggest?

Chall God raised up a prophet in our day who is able to rightly interpret the Bible, and explain what God is saying.

Troy Are you from that group that recently started meeting at Vanberth?

Chall We meet in a lecture hall at the college Sunday afternoons. Everyone is welcome.

Troy I'm familiar with your group. Don't you say that you are the only true Christians and the only ones rightly understanding the Bible?

Chall We invite you to come and check us out.

Troy You mentioned a prophet. He started your group, correct?

Chall Yes. God gave this man wisdom so we don't have to rely on the Bible alone, which has been misunderstood by so many.

Troy So your prophet speaks in a way that is easy to understand.

Chall Most certainly. You will be amazed at his insights.

Troy Is he easier to understand than Jesus?

Chall Jesus may have been easy to understand at one time, but after all these years and all the Bible translations, the message has become garbled.

Troy Since when did translating an original change the original?

Chall I suppose you're right, but the original has also changed.

Troy 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?

- Troy Since when did different opinions about an original change the original?
- Chall Don't you believe that God sends prophets?
- Troy God revealed himself to the world through the Jews. From them he sent many prophets, from Old Testament times until Jesus and his apostles. The message from each one was the same. Does your prophet's message line up with theirs?
- Chall You can't compare our prophet with the Bible since it's been changed.
- Troy Of course you have to say that to assert your prophet's authority over the Bible and explain why his message differs from it. Yet you cannot produce any evidence that the Bible has been changed.
- Chall Do you think it is wise to disregard a prophet of God?
- Troy Not if he is a true prophet, but I can tell yours is not because he opposes the true prophets God sent in the past. There have been hundreds of groups like yours, splintering off from Christianity over the past two thousand years. You use the same empty arguments to discredit the Bible as the atheists, false Christians, and followers of other religions.
- Chall If you would come and listen to our prophet, you would realize what a great man of God he is.
- Troy You all follow the same well-worn pattern. A charismatic leader arises and draws followers to himself. He questions or distorts the Bible, while his disciples blindly believe him. Once the Bible is nullified, this man assumes the role of God's sole mouthpiece, and he begins introducing his own doctrines. Finally, the prophet cements his power by declaring his followers to be the only true people of God.

Another presenter came forward with a topic.

Challenger Greetings. I am a Muslim.

Parvasu My colleague just finished talking about your prophet, Muhammad.

Chall I didn't hear him mentioned.

Parav He was a charismatic leader who introduced his own message while claiming the previous ones were corrupt, and now you insist that you are the only true people of God. Among the lone prophets,

Muhammad was the most successful of them all in terms of numbers.

Chall But the Bible and other religions have been changed. This is why God sent our prophet, to explain the true message of God for our age.

Parav Let's look at an example. You Muslims say that Jesus never died and rose from the dead, correct?

Chall True. God took Jesus straight to heaven before all that, so he never died on the cross and was never resurrected.

Parav Let's look at what the early Christians said. All four gospels describe numerous eyewitness accounts of Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the dead. The book of Acts boldly affirms his death and resurrection, as do many of the letters from Jesus' apostles and the book of Revelation. In other words, the New Testament says it everywhere, and there is not a single place where it implies anything to the contrary. 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.

Parav 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 after the fact. (Paravasu extended his arm toward the crowd.) I will let the audience decide who to believe.

Chall But a book is bound to be changed after being recopied over so many centuries.

Parav Like what happened with the Quran.

Chall Oh no. Not a single word of the Quran has ever been changed during copying.

Parav I see, but you are sure the Bible's been changed.

Chall Don't you Christians make the same claim about the Quran?

Parav 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?

Parav Because the Quran doesn't say anything remarkable to attract my attention, like all non-Christian scriptures. It contains only the words of one more prophet who says God spoke to him, with nothing to prove that he did. This is why no one bothers attacking these

other scriptures. However, the Bible is in a class by itself because if it happened as stated, then it obviously can't be ignored. So men either worship its God or scramble for ways to discredit it.

Chall If you read the Quran, your heart will tell you that Muslims are the true believers.

Parav Why are Muslims so unwilling to admit that Muhammad was a false prophet?

Chall No Muslim man would dare call Muhammad 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 would likely be beaten, and there is a good chance he would be killed as a heretic.

Parav That would explain 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 with that born again group over there. 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 a policeman leaked damaging information about David to City Hall. Do you have anything to tell us about that?"

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 returned tomorrow, he would put you with the hypocrites."

"You're calling me a hypocrite?"

Paul said, "You are a classic case because you are only interested in pleasing 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 hurt their faith. Quit caving in, and take a stand like a man."

Geoff began to tremble. "They threatened to fire me if I didn't give them something. I'm sorry, David."

Karl cried, "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, "Geoff, I forgive you, but you have a much bigger problem. You need to get off the fence and pick a side."

Sandra asked, "What are you going to do, Geoff? We are ready to help you any way we can."

Geoff paused, with his head still hung down. Then he walked silently into the gathering darkness, while the four of them watched.

CHAPTER 22

Friday

During the fellowship time at six thirty, someone asked Pastor Jesse and the 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 this man and laid their hands on him, asking for God's healing.

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 prayer went on for a few 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 the other Christians became aware of what happened, they began rejoicing and praising God with loud voices.

When Hank saw the tumor disappear, he was momentarily bewildered. Then he stepped back as it began to sink in. He had 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.

David and others 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 asked Jesus to forgive him. After a few minutes, Hank quieted down, and a deep peace came over him and those 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 gentleness.

At seven o'clock, the meeting started and a woman voiced her views.

Challenger My complaint is about your narrow religious views. I believe in God and grew up going to church, but at college I added some ideas from Oriental and American Indian religions. It's made me a better person, and I'm enjoying life. Would God be disappointed in me when my life is improving?

Kevin How do you know what kind of life God would be pleased with?

Chall That's obvious. 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. It was the first time at any school for both of them. The first lad didn't pay much attention to the teacher's instructions, except for shop class since he loved machines. He liked other subjects too, but those weren't studied at school. So he brought his own books and read them at the back of the classroom while the teacher lectured. Because he was studying things 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 most of the subjects, but he applied himself because he wanted to do well in school. These two boys had been friends while growing up, and the second one said to the first, "I can see you aren't doing the teacher's assignments. Don't you know you will flunk and will have to repeat the whole year?"

The second boy said, "I'm getting real 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 even graduate from high school, and he refuses to do what he's told.

Chall Maybe, but why are you assuming God operates that way?

Kevin To be honest, it is you who assumes God will passively go along with whatever you choose. I have assumed nothing, but have

searched to find if God has given us a syllabus defining the graduation requirements. We've all spent years in school and have seen good and bad students. The good students sought to please the school; the bad sought 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. Just as with poor students, the main problem is that people don't care, and they're not trying.
- Chall Let's say for the sake of argument that 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 of what he's like.
- Kevin There is only one biography of Jesus, written by four men. Thousands of first-century Christians, who knew Jesus personally, selected these four gospels to build their new faith upon, since they knew they were accurate.
- Chall Even if we can trust those biographies, I still have a big problem with their message, which says that a lot of people are headed to graduation day expecting a diploma, but they will get a rude awakening.
- Kevin That is the world as Jesus described it, and it matches the world we see today, with many who don't care about pleasing God. What is your problem with this gospel?
- Chall All those good people being flunked forever. I don't like it.
- Kevin But it's fair. God is giving you a whole lifetime to respond while he waits patiently. And it's merciful since he is willing to forgive your delinquent past. Jesus even paid for it himself though he was innocent. God's good news is both just and gracious, an unbeatable offer.
- Chall If it's so good, why do so many refuse it?
- Kevin That's our question for you and the audience. Why are you refusing it? God has done us no wrong and has gone far out of his way to win us back. Many do accept his offer, but others inexplicably push it away.
- Chall (Walking away from the stage shaking her head.) I really don't like it.

The next presenter approached the microphone.

Challenger Good evening, everyone. I am a pastor at a local church. I can guess why the woman who was just up here doesn't want to follow the Bible exactly as written. The Bible has a lot of mistakes, so we have to be careful about which parts we use.

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 to base your faith on?

Chall In spite of the Bible's historical errors, I believe its message of God's unconditional love is accurate.

Troy What about the many parts that warn of punishment?

Chall Our church doesn't believe that God punishes people.

Troy Don't your distinctions strike you as self-serving?

Chall If a story has mistakes, there is good reason to doubt all of its credibility.

Troy Let's test your theory. What if a close friend of yours suddenly approached the stage and said, "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 your friend's story. You don't have a garage, and your house is at least five minutes from here even at top speed. Do you drop your microphone and race home? Or do you stay here, knowing it's a false alarm due to his errors?

Chall Of course I would go home.

Troy How do you explain the errors?

Chall I don't know. Maybe the neighbor's garage was on fire and he assumed it was mine, and maybe he's not good at judging time.

Troy Here's another example. Suppose your grandpa fought in D-Day, the allied attack on 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, telling you it was on June 4. Would you think that he was confused or forgetful and didn't actually fight in the D-Day invasion?

Chall That's ridiculous. You wouldn't forget something like that.

Troy Wouldn't you be tempted to think that D-Day never took place? Don't his mistakes cast doubt on the whole event?

Chall This is nonsense. What's your point?

- Troy Please explain why men do this very thing with the Bible. They are told that momentous events occurred, as momentous as D-Day, but they are ready to deny the whole thing ever happened only because they think they've found an inconsistency. Do you believe God judged the ancient world with a flood, or do you think Noah and his family were confused or forgetful about the entire earth being flooded?
- Chall I imagine they wouldn't be mistaken about something as earth-shattering as that.
- Troy So do you still think your errors prove that God never punished the world with a flood?
- Chall Are you admitting at least minor errors in the Bible? Your two examples had them.
- Troy No. I don't see the errors you allege. But the point of my two examples is that even with minor errors, you would still think your house is on fire and still believe your grandpa fought in D-Day. Therefore, whether one believes there are minor errors or not, the honest person's response to the Bible should be the same. Instead, you think minor errors give you license to arbitrarily choose the parts of the Bible that suit you, which exposes your real agenda.
- Chall The Bible claims to be the word of God. If I find even one mistake in it, that proves it's only the opinions of men and can be treated as such.
- 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 spent several hours conversing with a band of twelve men who were also staying there. These twelve related the amazing story 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. His resurrection and many other miracles prove that he can deliver on this bold promise. Do you believe us?"

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. To gain immortality, I will gladly join you and become a disciple of your Master."

The twelve said, "Wonderful! Our Master gave us the word of God, so we will teach you the changes God requires in your lifestyle."

"Changes?" The stranger's expression altered. "Did you say word of God? I noticed a few mistakes in your stories. Some names, numbers, and dates didn't line up as precisely as I think they should. I'm having second thoughts."

The twelve were astounded and said, "We saw him raise people from the dead and ascend into the clouds before our very eyes."

The stranger continued, "You claim to have the word of God, so if I find what appears to be even one mistake, it proves that your stories are only the opinions of men."

They were astonished. "Do you now doubt all we have told you?"

"With my new perspective, I feel free to question everything. As for this alleged Master, I doubt he ever did any miracles, and he certainly was not resurrected."

As the crowd dispersed, David and Liz were by the stage when they saw Hank bringing Elliot. Hank said, "Look who I found."

David put out his hand. "Elliot! How have you been?"

"Not too bad."

"Have you been coming to every one of these?"

"Nah, 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 make a difference," and described to Elliot the healing miracle he had witnessed earlier.

Elliot seemed unmoved and asked David, "Did you see it?"

"Yes. I saw exactly what Hank described."

"How about you, Liz?"

"Not directly, but it was clear by people's reactions what happened. So what do you say?"

"About what?"

"This is proof," Liz exclaimed.

"Did anyone take a video?"

David responded, "No, but our word is better proof than a video, which can be edited. You know us and you know we aren't gullible. We can bring you to the man who was healed."

Elliot had a condescending smile. "I know you mean well."

David became agitated. "You never thought we were deceivers before. Does every Christian turn into a liar?"

"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."

"Suppose a hundred people whom you knew to be honest and level-headed, like us, saw an obvious miracle in Jesus' name. Would you believe them?"

"Probably not."

David said, "But you would if you saw it yourself?"

"Sure," Elliot said, "because I'm more trustworthy than a hundred people." The three of them were temporarily at a loss for words.

Finally Hank said, "Please, Elliot, why are you so sure miracles could never happen?"

"Isn't it suspicious that everyone else sees them but me?"

Hank said gently, "Please humor me for one more minute. Isn't it possible that miracles are rare, which is why only some people see them?"

"It's possible."

"Thank you for your patience. It would actually be to our advantage that miracles are rare because then it points more clearly to the hand of God behind them."

"I guess that's true."

"Good, good." Hank continued. "Now isn't it perhaps possible that God is showing himself to you through what we're telling you?"

Elliot said, "No. I don't think God would do it that way."

David said quietly, "Any chance you've made a mistake? Your eternal destiny is on the line."

"I doubt it. Say Hank, what happened to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're so polite and . . . meek. What happened to the blunt old codger we all knew?"

Hank replied, "He's dead, and he won't be coming back. That's another miracle."

The next day, 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 follow."

"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 away from Christ. Do you have a grudge against someone in the church?"

"Maybe," Cooper said. "Why worry about me? I grew up in a Christian home, and I've done all kinds of things in the church. Focus on these new guys."

"These two are heading towards Jesus' throne. You're heading away from it."

"I don't need the church to serve God."

"You are mistaken," Paul said. "If you shun those whom Jesus loves, you have denied Christ."

Cooper's voice rose. "I'm not so sure Jesus 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 thought it best 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 thing I want to stay away from."

Paul warned, "Do you realize that if Jesus came back today, you might be considered a deserter? You know better. Why are you taking such a risk with your soul?"

Cooper smirked. "A deserter, huh? That's my concern. I will have to ask you gentlemen to be on your way. I've got a lot of things I want to do today."

Sunday

At six o'clock, believers streamed into the park from all directions. In remembrance of their Lord, they held a solemn communion service. David was there with his father Ezra, surrounded by Karl, Paul, Sandra, Liz, Jose and Hank. Sandra said, "Just think, someday all of us will be with Mary, enjoying God's beautiful new world forevermore."

Pastor Jesse approached and put his hand on David's shoulder. "He's here. It's time." Paul and David followed Jesse to the other side of the crowd where Owen was joking with some friends. They told him, "Owen, we'd like to talk to you in private."

Jesse started, "Owen, we have 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 save us from our sin, so we stop doing it."

"God will stop my sinning when I die."

Paul said, "Now is when God calls us to abandon evil. It's too late at his coming."

"Are you denying God's grace?"

"Owen, why won't you give up your sin? Have you even tried?"

"We're not saved by works. And if I try to stop on my own, I would insult the cross of Christ."

Jesse said, "You insult the cross by continuing in sin. Jesus died to rescue you from sin, not give you a reason to stay in it."

"We can't stop sinning. Only God can stop us."

"Are you saying it's God's fault?"

"In a way," Owen said. "If he thought it was as important as you guys, he'd stop me. 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.

"That verse says we are *not* justified by faith alone."

"Oh," Owen said. "Well, God's love is unconditional. And sinning is in our nature, so we can't help it. 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 Jewish Law."

"Are you telling me you never sin anymore?"

"Not consciously, as you claim to do."

"You're being legalistic."

"What about Jesus' commands?"

Owen said, "Those are meant to show us that we can't keep them, so we see our need of forgiveness."

"What?" David said. "You think God doesn't expect us to obey his commands?"

"Sure," Owen said, "and if I tried to obey, it wouldn't count anyway 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, "Ideas from respected men of God, who assure me I can sin without fear. Jesus gives his righteousness to me, so when God sees my sin he doesn't really see it."

"Jesus makes us righteous by leading us to do what is right."

"The Bible says no one is righteous."

Paul looked at Jesse, "This could go on forever."

Owen continued, "Salvation was a gift, given when I said a prayer one day. God won't take it back, no matter what. David, why do you keep sticking your fingers out?"

"I'm tracking your excuses, and so far I've counted nineteen."

Jesse said, "Owen, did you hear what your friend said? Nineteen reasons, all with one purpose: permit evil. You haven't put your faith in Jesus."

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 changed, which makes you unrepentant. If Jesus returned today, it's very possible you would be thrown out with the unbelievers."

Owen shouted, "You're calling me unrepentant?"

Jesse continued, "I recently did a Bible study on Jesus' parables. Many of them had this message in common: Someone thought he belonged to God's people, but he missed out on the kingdom. Can you guess why?"

"Because he didn't know how much Jesus loved him?"

"That was never mentioned. The reasons given were disobedience, bearing no fruit for God, and practicing wickedness. Sound familiar? Coincidentally, nineteen parables carried this theme. Owen, could some of those nineteen apply to you?"

"No way."

David said gently, "Is there any chance you might be wrong?"

Owen, "I know I'm born again. How dare you insinuate I might not be saved. I'm offended." Owen stalked out of the park.

David began to weep, so Paul encouraged him. "It's not over yet. He might still see the light."

David sobbed, "It's not just him. That's the fifth friend I've seen walk away from the Lord in the last week."

David walked slowly to the stage where Troy, Parvasu, and Kevin were waiting. Kevin said, "Hi, David. We've been praying and feel that you should take one of the challenges tonight."

David replied, "This is not a good time. I don't have anything to give."

Parvasu smiled. "You're ready for God to work through you."

Troy explained, "David, since you're a young Christian, you may not be familiar with the ways of the Lord. He often works best 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 there."

"Oh boy," David said. "At least can I take the second one?"

"Sure. Come sit on stage with us."

As David sat down, he looked over and saw his father also sitting on stage. They both said at the same time, "What are you doing here?"

David answered, "I was asked to debate one of the challengers, and you?"

"I have a story to tell."

The first challenger walked up on the stage.

Challenger Hello. My topic this evening is the problem of evil.

Paravasu Ah yes, evil is a big problem. By evil can I assume you mean an injustice has been committed?

Chall Yes.

Parav So if I experience suffering or don't get what I want, is that always evil?

Chall No. Often it's our own fault, or we have unreasonable expectations.

Parav 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 a good God does not exist.

Parav I don't see the logical connection. If I steal your vehicle, how does that make David over here an evildoer?

Chall God could stop it, but he doesn't.

Parav Do you have children?

Chall Yes.

Parav Do they ever do anything wrong?

Chall Sometimes.

Parav Why aren't you stopping it? Either you are an evil person, or you don't exist.

Chall I can't stop them all the time.

Parav Sure you can. Strap them to their beds. They wouldn't get into any more trouble.

Chall That would be cruel.

Parav But it would stop their evil. Aren't you insisting that this is the only moral thing to do?

- Chall I'd rather train them to be a good person, even if it allows some mischief for a time.
- Parav I rest my case.
- Chall But it's different with God. I'm not allowing people to starve in ghettos and drop bombs on each other.
- Parav We are doing that to ourselves. Why are you blaming God? You agreed earlier that God isn't evil just because he doesn't give us whatever we want. Can you name a single wrong God has done to us?
- Chall According to my definition of good, there are plenty of things God should be doing, but isn't. This proves he can't exist, at least the Christian version of him.
- Parav The Christian version of God is one who is good and who allows others to perpetrate evil in his universe for now. You conveniently pick an alternate definition of good, thinking this proves your point. It only proves that God—as you imagine he ought to be—doesn't exist.
- Chall I know how a good God should act.
- Parav I believe your real objection concerns God's guilt and innocence. Is he partly to blame? You claim the evidence convicts him.
- Chall That's true. So are you going to argue for his innocence?
- Parav I will answer with a story.

One day an eight-year-old boy walked into the White House, going all the way to the president's desk. When the president looked up, the boy addressed him with these words: "Sir, I have several complaints. First of all, the bench at the ball field is full of slivers, and the outfield is filled with potholes. At school bullies pick on me, and the math lessons are boring. My dog is ailing, but my 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 that this suggests you don't exist, but since I see you sitting right there, I believe it proves 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.

- Parav What makes this tale preposterous? This boy lacked 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? That's ridiculous.
- Parav 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.
- Parav Are you really interested in fairness, or are you just a rebellious son who ran away from home, blaming his parents for his anger?
- Chall Someone's got to speak up about the world's atrocities.
- Parav God's been working to stop evil since the dawn of man. I suggest you cooperate with him instead of fighting him. I also suggest you start by addressing the evil in yourself, before God does so on the Day of Judgment.
- Chall I find the idea of a final judgment absurd.
- Parav 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.
- Parav I have great news! The problem of evil has been solved. God has a fantastic plan, already in process, and in the age to come evil will be gone forever.
- Chall That's great for then, but what about now?
- Parav Jesus said he's coming back soon, so the day of evil's departure is right around the corner, maybe next week.
- Chall Well . . . what's the hurry?
- Parav I thought you were anxious for God to stop evil. I'm telling you he is almost finished.
- Chall Let's not rush it.
- Parav It gets better. God could have strapped us to our beds, or repaid us what we deserved. But because he loved the world, he sent his Son to pardon us and turn us away from evil, so we could live forever. Do you still think God is not good?
- Chall Can I get back to you on that?
- Parav Don't wait too long. On the day Jesus comes from the sky with his mighty 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, the Ashbow synagogue.

David It is a genuine pleasure to meet you, Rabbi. I regret that I didn't attend your synagogue before I became a Christian.

Rabbi Are you Jewish?

David I am Jewish and a Christian. My name is David Ruben.

Rabbi You're that David. A Jewish Christian. How interesting. The topic I would like to discuss is the exclusiveness of Christianity. Some Christians claim that yours is the only authentic religion. As everyone knows, 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 If you are asking me to explain why Christianity didn't spread evenly throughout the earth, I cannot.

Rabbi What I mean is, doesn't this confirm that your faith can't be the only right one? God wouldn't show himself only to some people.

David God has shown himself to all men and women through means such as the witness of his creation and our conscience.

Rabbi Perhaps, but if there is only one true faith, those who hear about it have an advantage over those who don't.

David All kinds of vital knowledge is unevenly distributed around the world. We never use that fact as a test of truthfulness, so why do it with religions?

Rabbi I would have a hard time believing in a religion that affirms such inequity.

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 basically the same thing.

David saw his friends grinning in the front row over this statement.

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 Let's look at how God actually did it with our ancestors, men such as Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Initially, God revealed

himself only to a few men like them. Then their message was progressively passed on to the rest of us. We Jews are fortunate that Abraham didn't say, "God, why are you promising the land of Israel to my descendants only and not to everyone? I don't think that's fair, so I won't obey you."

Rabbi Doesn't the uneven distribution of Christianity make you wonder about its truthfulness?

David My confidence in the truthfulness of Christianity is based on the convincing proofs God gave his prophets, from Abraham to the Apostles. It's also based on his power today, which I've already seen working in his church and in my life. The fact that some nations accepted Christianity more readily than others does nothing to nullify these proofs.

Rabbi I still wouldn't obey Jesus, because I don't think he is God's promised Messiah.

David I recently did a study on this and found an astounding number of similarities between Jesus and the manner of God with the nation of Israel. Do you mind if I read a small sample of them?

Rabbi Be my guest.

David pulled a sheet of paper from his Bible. As he was about to begin, he noticed for the first time his cousin Joseph sitting in the front row. Joseph smiled and gave David a big 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 we die.

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 promised us a new country through him. Like Isaac, his birth was miraculous and he was a Son 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 his people, and returned as their savior with a new covenant. Like Aaron, he was a high priest offering 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 made him King after all. Like Elijah, he predicted

the future 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. 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 to all, 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, which was John the Baptist.

Rabbi I see the similarities, but where is the Messiah's rule of peace and righteousness across the whole Earth?

David It's already here, and it's growing. As we speak, Jesus' servants are carrying the knowledge of the God of Abraham to the remotest jungles and mountain tops, something the Jews never did. Jesus' rule has been spreading for two thousand years. Come over there at six o'clock and hear testimonies of the peace and righteousness that Messiah Jesus 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 Which was also the reason Jew and Gentile conspired to murder him. They didn't know his Father, so naturally they rejected the Son.

Rabbi Our Scriptures say there is only one God.

David Genesis chapter two tells us how God made the first man and woman one flesh. So how many were there, one or two? Will you ignore God's chosen messenger solely because of a semantic technicality, committing the same blunder as 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. Before we are dismissed, I have a short story to share. It relates to the discussions we've been hearing the past three weeks."

An airplane carrying several dozen people crashed high in the mountains. A few passengers died, but most survived without injury. After

waiting by the airplane for two weeks, they realized no one was coming to rescue them. The difficult decision was made to hike as a group out of the remote mountain area. Their provisions had run out in the first few days, and 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 a week, they still had found no food or sign of civilization and were getting desperately weak.

The next day, they were hiking along a ridge with a flat bottomed valley on their left, one hundred feet down a 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 grid pattern and stone wall made it obvious that they had been planted by men, but there was no other sign of humans. It was obvious that the orchard had been abandoned years ago. They studied the trees for a moment until 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, so he asked them to each give their reasons.

The first one said, "Nearly half of those trees have rotten fruit. Lousy orchard."

The next one, a blind man, said, "It's too good to be true. You're only saying it to make me feel better."

The next person was hostile. "I hate fruit, and I hate your kind, who are always pushing it on us."

Another said, "Can we trust those who planted the orchard? Maybe those are poisonous fruit trees."

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 designed."

The next one said, "God has answered our prayers. Hiking down there would be earning my salvation, and my efforts would steal glory from God. He'll hand us the fruit."

Another declared confidently, "Science has proven that fruit trees never grow at this altitude, so that has to be a mirage brought on by extreme hunger."

The next one said, "Some of these good people are refusing to eat and will die. I can't accept that horrendous injustice."

A few had gathered around a leader. "Our charismatic leader says he alone knows where the true orchard is."

Another answered, "Those were probably good fruit trees long ago, but I'm sure they've become corrupted over the years."

Another person said, "I see gaps in the stone wall and a pine tree where a fruit tree should be planted. We've been praying for help, but these errors prove this orchard cannot be from God."

Another complained, "Some perished in the plane crash, and three nights ago a baby died of starvation. These evils prove that this good orchard could not exist."

Another said, "What about those five who split off from us last week? They won't find this orchard. Is that fair? Why be so narrow minded and insist this is the only one?"

The next person said, "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 are refusing to eat? They can't all be wrong."

The last one moaned, "Many years ago, I had an awful experience with a fruit tree."

When all the objectors finished, they turned to a shabbily dressed figure on the edge of the crowd, 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 addressed the crowd. "You are thinking that this story is silly and real people would never act like that. But I submit to you that this is what many are doing. The Christian faith is a gateway to eternity in paradise, yet people concoct every imaginable explanation to refuse it. I was a skeptic for sixty-five years, a Jew who despised Christianity. Now I realize that I was as foolish as those in the story. All I ask is that you set aside some time to take an honest look at your objections, since your eternity is at stake. Millions of Christians are telling you that there is fruit. Come, eat, and live forever."

As the crowd departed, Anna came to the stage and found David, who said, "Anna. I didn't know you were here."

"I've come every night," replied Anna. "You did a good job up there."

"Thanks."

"I'm sure you're anxious to know where I'm at."

"That would be an understatement."

Anna explained, "These talks have given me some things to think about, but I still don't see it like you do. We both know it wouldn't work out between us. We are too different now."

David was quiet for a bit, then said, "You are right. I wish with all my heart things were different."

"So do I."

"If you ever change your mind, give me a call."

Anna mumbled, "Yeah." She turned and walked away. David watched her until she disappeared out of sight.

Ezra appeared and David confessed, "You know Dad, after what Anna just told me, 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 said, "You take the car home. I feel like walking. I need some 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. Do we know each other?"

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 last winter 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 as he said, "You got time for a cup of coffee?"

The man paused for a moment and replied, "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 come of David, from whom he had heard nothing for the past year. The events starting at David's house a year-and-a-half earlier had been 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 briefly reviewed his experiences 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?"

"This and that. 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 notice 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 sort of 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. It was fun. The new one is better than the old, don't you think?"

Paul glanced at the window. "You did a good job. Do you still go to Jesse's church?"

"Not recently."

"Did you find a different one?"

"Not sure yet. I should show you what I did with the backyard. Since my grass was trampled to death last year, I put in a Japanese garden."

Sweat beaded on Paul's forehead. "What has God been saying to you in your Bible reading lately?"

"You're asking a lot of questions."

"I'm sorry. I've been away a whole year."

"I can understand," David said. "Are you going back to your old job?"

"I've got to sort that out yet. What do you know about the gang from last year? What's everybody doing?"

"To be honest, I haven't kept in touch. I'm afraid I've been kind of a hermit."

Paul's stomach tightened. "Are you doing anything with a Christian ministry?"

"Not really. Don't worry though. I still believe in God."

Paul started to feel panic. David was not his usual talkative self, and he stood there politely, but silently, as if he was hoping Paul would leave soon. Finally Paul broke the awkward silence and asked, "Say, how is your dad Ezra doing?"

"Fine, I guess. He went back to New York last year."

"Have you talked to him lately?"

"Not since last year. I suppose I should give him a call sometime." After more silence, David said, "I bet you have a lot of things to do since you just got back in town. We'll have to get together sometime. I'll call you." David drifted over to the front door and slowly opened it. Paul moved like a zombie out the door and mumbled, "Yeah, give me a call."

David shut the door, leaving Paul to stare incredulously at the sidewalk. He started walking aimlessly away from the house. *This is bad*, he thought. *This is real bad, not only for David, but for everyone watching him.* The very thing Paul had feared had happened. Every sign of eternal life was gone from David, except for his meaningless profession of faith. He had lost everything he had gained. Now that he'd been inoculated, it would be much harder to reach him.

Wiping tears from his eyes, Paul broke into a jog 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 sit up in bed. In a matter of seconds, a wonderful realization came over him. He leapt to his feet and danced around his bedroom, cheering and pumping his fists in the air. "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, but there was no way he could go to David's house this early. He ate breakfast and loitered around for a while until he couldn't stand to wait any longer. Since Paul was without a car, and it was a pristine morning, he decided to bicycle the few miles to David's house.

As Paul streaked across town, he wondered why he would have such a dream. Was it to prepare him for something? He shuddered to think that it had anything to do with reality. He turned down David's street and the anxiety from the dream returned. As he pulled in front of the house, he noticed that the picture window was still broken. Plywood and clear plastic sheets filled the large hole. *Maybe he doesn't live here anymore.* There was only one way to find out. He knocked on the door.

The door creaked slightly open and a stranger peered through the gap. His dirty plaid 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 will be getting up?"

"Don't know."

After a lengthy pause, Paul offered, "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 the marble pillars still in place."

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 because of me."

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 evening in the park by downtown. I invited him to my Saturday morning Bible study, 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 Saturday morning Bible study?" Paul stammered.

"It starts in half an 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. For some reason, he brings all these seekers my way. It's been so busy I haven't even 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. 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 my getting carried away, but . . . 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 wait. 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. 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. Right, Louie?"

Louie said from the kitchen, "Whatever you say, Dave. Why did they fire you?"

"I was seeking the truth about God."

"Did you sue 'em?" Louie asked.

David explained, "At first I was thinking about it, but my dad set me straight. Christians never do things like that, demanding our rights. We follow our Master's teaching."

"What's that?" Louie said.

"Turn the other cheek," Paul answered. "So what are you doing for work now, David?"

"I work part-time for Pastor Jesse. The rest of my time I go wherever the Holy Spirit sends me."

"One more question and I'll let you get ready. How's your dad doing?"

"Ask him yourself. I hear him coming up the stairs right now."

"He's what?" cried Paul.

David left for his bedroom 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. I'm not going back either. The Midwest suits me fine. And I'm getting ready for a special event coming up soon."

"What's that?"

"You'll find out soon enough." 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."

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 in shock. 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 seemed to be 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 to see 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 settled down, he asked Anna, "What happened?"

Anna smiled and looked over at David. "It was a couple months after you left town. It's a long story, but basically I woke up one day and said to myself, 'What am I doing? I know it's all true.'" Remember that story in the park about that woman called Beloved, where she dreams that the Prince proposes, and she turns him down?"

Paul nodded. "People do strange things in dreams."

"I felt just like her. I was turning down the offer of a lifetime—of an eternity. I still had some baggage to deal with, but after that point I got over those real fast."

David added, "And the rest is history, a beautiful history."

Anna put her arm around David. "And now I've got two princes."

"So you two are getting married? When?"

David told him, "Next month. We'd both like 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 on 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."

Several Years Later

David walked into an Ashbow nursing home, 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?" David said.

"Fine, what I could eat of it."

"I'm sorry Anna and the kids couldn't come this time. I'll bring them this evening."

"Just as well. I want to talk to you privately. I don't have many days left." David listened with a pained look on his face. "Don't feel bad for me. I go to a much better place. I know my Savior is alive and he has promised to receive me on the other side of death's door. Am I right?"

"Father, everything I have 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 sighed. "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 arm and laid it on David's knee. "David Jeremiah 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 makes 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, or weary, or angry, when the journey turns bitter, remember your father. Don't give up. Don't turn off the path. 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."

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 hands on his chest.

David jumped to his feet. "Are you okay? Should I call the nurse?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine, just give me a minute." After Ezra recovered, he said, "Perhaps when I get to the other side I'll meet the author."

"If you do, tell them that this book changed my life."

"I think the author would say that this book only points to another book, and that other book points to the God who changes lives."



Reward

There was a man named Christian. He was one of the saints, which means holy ones. He was hiking up a mountain pass and was almost at the top. Many years ago, he left the land of his birth and set his feet on a path toward the other side of the mountains. He had learned that the tainted world on this side was passing away, but the pure 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 going 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 soared up into the clouds. He obviously had to pass through the gate.

As Christian drew near the gate, he noticed it was built of very ancient stones, and its massive door was made of rust-covered iron. Christian knocked on the door and it opened by itself with loud creaking. Inside was complete blackness. Christian hesitated. Then he noticed an inscription above the door which read, "He who overcomes will inherit this reward." He stepped confidently into the darkness, and the colossal door shut behind him.

He was in total darkness for a moment until another door opened in front of him. Light flooded the tunnel and he shielded his eyes. Christian stepped out of the tunnel and began walking down the path, his eyes gradually adjusting. 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 sweet smelling.

As he continued walking, he became more aware of the fantastic 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 and joy 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 whole 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 seen in the old world could not compare with the splendor of this country. But it also had something entirely new—purity. He could feel down to his bones that everything he saw was utterly untainted, without the slightest trace of corruption. Nearby, Christian spotted a bench under the shade of a giant oak, so he sat down on it.

After a few minutes, a man in a bright white robe appeared, walking along the side of the ridge. When he got close he said, "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 of my old home ever leak over to this place?"

"Never!" cried the messenger. "By an unchanging decree of our King, all who do what is vile are forever barred from setting foot here."

"What is to become of the land I just left?"

"God has sworn that the kingdom of his enemy will one day be destroyed. Then this magnificent land will fill the whole Earth for all time."

"When will this be?"

"No one knows but the Father. However, we know it will not be many eons in the distant future, for he said it will take place soon. 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 something 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 predicted."

Christian asked, "What will life be like in this new world?"

"For us who love him, God has prepared a spectacular feast. Your youth will be renewed, and you will be given a crown with all the honor, riches, and authority that comes with it. This is a place of safety, peace, and prosperity, where no one will ever harm you. There is no hate here."

"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 joyfully reunited with the saints you knew on Earth. But here is perhaps the most glorious facet of this new life. All the good things I am describing—they will continue without end."

Christian was overwhelmed. "Death was the black shroud that darkened every corner of my old home."

"Here you have no fear of sickness and no concern that a loved one will be lost in an accident. No enemy nation will ever invade, and no madman will every go on a rampage, for God 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 stone forever, for our God never lies."

Christian added, "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 requested, "You have told me about this place, but tell me about our God since all these wonders flow from him."

The messenger proclaimed, "You already know him, and have learned his ways during your former life, where you encountered his gentleness, power, and fairness. 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."

Christian sat up with excitement. "What is that?"

"In this world God lives among his people, and we see his face."

"To live in the presence of God; this 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 noted, "How utterly insane to forego all this in exchange for a few years of illicit pleasure. Oh, that some could hear my words and seize the chance to come to this place, while there is still time."

The messenger stood to his feet. "Let us not delay any longer, for today is your wedding day. Know this, Christian, that the heart of your reward is not this place, but a person, and not just a person, but God. Come. We shall descend this hill and I will bring you to meet your God face to face. At his side, you will enjoy his renewed creation, forever and ever."



David closed 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 headed toward his friend's house in another part of town. For a shortcut, he walked through a cemetery, which was filled with Ashbow's departed. Like most people, this lad never suspected 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, and some carelessly stayed in false religions. There were also those who had been part of a church but defied God by their deeds. Among them were the hypocrites, the unrepentant, and the deserters, as well as the adulterers who mixed Christianity with other practices. These all professed faith and assumed their destiny was secure, but they had not done God's will. Mixed among these graves were the bodies of those who truly loved the Lord. They obeyed Christ until the end, and lived their lives in anticipation of the great day. The thoughts, words, and deeds of them all, good and bad, had been carefully recorded in heaven.

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 to get married next month. Retirees were enjoying a late breakfast with their friends, reminiscing over the past.

These people rarely gave thought to their Maker and his demands on their lives. They were too consumed with the cares and pleasures of life. Perhaps when things settled down they would have more time for God. 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 small church which his family had attended off and on. 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 really expected that Christians alone would inherit the Earth. This would happen on the day when Jesus appears unannounced in the sky, coming with thousands of angels. They didn't prepare for this day, even though it is stated plainly in the book upon which their church is based.

On that day, the entire world will see Jesus coming to rule the Earth. At that time, Christ will punish the wicked, bringing their plans to a sudden

and violent end, but he will gather those who love him to their eternal reward. The boy and his family were not anticipating this, even though they are warned in the book which they claim to believe. Inexplicably, they made no effort to separate themselves from the world's corruption and get ready for Jesus' return, which could come at any time.

The boy arrived at his friend's house, where they intended to play all day. They were eager to try out the newest gadgets and enjoy the latest in music, movies, and games. As they were engrossed in their activities, they suddenly heard a dreadfully loud 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. At the same time, both the earth below and the heavens above began to shake. This threw them to the ground in the front yard. The lad picked himself up and turned his face heavenward. He thrust his arm up, pointing to the clouds. With a look of terror, he shrieked, "Look!!!"