

# Hope in the Dark

Believing God Is Good  
When Life Is Not

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*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR



ZONDERVAN

*Hope in the Dark*

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**PART 1**

# **Hide and Seek**

## 1.1

# Where Are You, God?

*Human beings do not readily admit desperation.  
When they do, the kingdom of heaven draws near.*

—Philip Yancey

**P**ainful trials are fertile ground for the seeds of doubt. But life doesn't have to fall apart for someone to start questioning the presence and goodness of God. My first bout with doubt didn't strike during a difficult time; rather it hit during an otherwise ordinary moment in, of all places, a church.

When I was growing up, my family went to church semi-regularly. Naturally, as a kid I just assumed that's what everybody else's families did too. I also assumed that everything I heard about God was true, just as I knew that two plus two equals four and that the Dallas Cowboys were the best team in the NFL. But then, sitting in church one Sunday morning when I was probably about ten or eleven, a buzzing swarm of questions suddenly descended and began to sting my consciousness: "What if all this stuff I've always believed isn't true?"

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What if God isn't real? And if he *is* real, is he involved in our lives—in *my* life? Does he really care?"

I looked all around, trying to see if anyone else was wrestling with the same intrusive thoughts. No one else, or at least no adults, seemed the least bit antsy or uncomfortable. (Later I learned that appearances can be deceiving.) It wasn't that I suddenly stopped believing what our preacher was saying; honestly, I don't even remember what he was saying. But it was clear that the foundation of my young reality had started to crumble.

The more I thought about the questions I was having, the more questions I seemed to have. If God was in control (as he was supposed to be), then why did so many bad things happen? Granted, my own life was pretty good; I had loving parents and plenty to eat and a warm, dry house. But I was old enough to realize that a lot of people didn't have those things. I had friends whose parents had gone through bitter, angry divorces, and friends who had only one parent at home. I knew kids who got so ill that they had to stop coming to school. The headlines on the news began to penetrate my cartoon-addled mind in a way they never had before, awakening me to bad things happening in the world every day: war, murder, poverty, corruption.

And once those doubts crept in, they lingered. It was as if they had managed to find a secret passage into my mind, and I wondered if I could ever get rid of them. For years I warred with a private spiritual dilemma. If you were to ask me, "Are you a Christian?" I would have said, "Of course." Almost

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everyone I knew back then would have said the same thing. After all, we weren't Buddhists or Muslims. I claimed to be a Christian, but my life didn't look anything like Christ's. And secretly I wasn't even sure what I really believed about God. If he was real, I assumed, my doubts probably disappointed him—or worse.

It wasn't until college that I truly understood the gospel and what it means to follow Jesus. And for the first time in my life, I started reading the Bible. I was shocked to find that some of the people in the Bible had doubts, just like I did. Thankfully, many of the Bible stories and teachings addressed a bunch of the questions I'd silently wondered about for years. It wasn't as though suddenly I had found a giant flyswatter I could use to bat them all down. It was more like discovering new paths through a familiar forest. I still saw the trees—all of those bad things in the world—but now I also saw a trail leading to the clearing before me. The trees were still all around me, but they no longer stopped me from moving forward.

Until I ran smack into a giant redwood in seminary.

**"HERE'S WHAT I THINK OF THIS BOOK!"** EXCLAIMED MY NEW Testament professor as he threw the Bible across the classroom in contempt. "It's time you learned the truth about the fairy tales you've been basing your faith on."

You may find that hard to believe, but it's true. While I had some awesome, faith-filled seminary professors, men and women who helped prepare me to be an effective pastor, I had

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others who were shockingly hostile not only toward all that I'd been raised to believe but even toward God. Just like life itself, my seminary experience was a rollercoaster ride of faith and doubt, despair and hope.

My decision to go there was amazing enough already.

When I felt God calling me into ministry, I was as surprised as anyone. It's not that I was unwilling; it was simply that as a former wild frat-guy-jock-business-major turned Christian, I didn't exactly fit the stereotype I had in my head of what a pastor should look like. By the grace of God, my pastor invited me to join the church staff to help reach some of the younger people the church was missing. My newlywed wife, Amy, and I felt overwhelmed with excitement, honored to be serving God full-time in our church.

When it became obvious that a seminary degree would be an important step in my development—and necessary for my future—I enrolled while still working full-time. Even though the thought of all that extra work and studying intimidated me, I was excited at the prospect of strengthening my faith and becoming better equipped to fulfill all that I felt God leading me to do.

So imagine my shock when I discovered a jaded, cynical attitude among some of my professors and some of the other students. The way they talked, only someone naive or uneducated could really believe in and accept the Bible literally as God's Word.

Without a doubt, my New Testament professor was the worst offender. He didn't believe that Jesus had said or done

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most of what we find recorded in the Gospels. According to this teacher, Paul wrote only a few of the letters that we attribute to him, and John was most likely coming off a bad drug trip when he wrote Revelation.

I was stunned. Devastated. This guy had more degrees than I had tennis trophies. He was brilliant and even revered in certain theological circles. Someone with his credentials *had* to know what he was talking about, right? Suddenly the questions that I'd thought were dead and gone sprang back to life. Could what he said be true? Was it possible that the Bible wasn't really the timeless, inspired Word of God? Was God real? What if *none* of it was true? All my previous doubts came flooding back into my mind. As a child, I hadn't told anyone because I was afraid of what they might think. As an adult—and a pastor—I was paralyzed with fear. No one could know. What would they think? Nothing could be worse than a pastor unsure of his faith.

So I struggled uphill with my doubts for a while, painfully aware of the many tall trees blocking my path. Eventually, though, I mustered the courage to open up to two people: my pastor and another professor. These wise and mature mentors didn't criticize me or disparage my questions; they gave me permission to wrestle. Then they helped guide me back to truth. What meant the most to me was when they talked openly about their own faith struggles and explained how God had sustained them through their doubts. Their living example taught me that honestly facing my doubts could strengthen my faith and that God would show himself faithful through the process.

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My faith may have been on life support, but it didn't just survive; it grew and strengthened. It was as if God made a path through a forest of doubts.

At least until the next obstacle blocked my way.

IT'S TEMPTING TO THINK THAT MANY OF US WILL REACH A POINT in our lives where we'll be forced to question all that we believe, and then after this struggle we'll never doubt again. The truth, however, is that all of us test our beliefs every day. Every time you make a decision about how to respond to someone who is rude to you, your beliefs are front and center. Every time you feel that ache in your body, a reminder of the emergency surgery you're still paying for two years later, you wonder if you'll recover, not just physically but financially as well.

When your car breaks down on the same day that your spouse overdraws your checking account, you face a dilemma about how you'll respond—and more important, about what the basis for your response will be. When you're reading a news app and scan the “word bites” about impending military action against yet another aggressive country, about the latest victim of a serial killer, or about the death toll in a train accident, you're forced to confront your own beliefs—about human nature, about life, and about God.

The more I've lived life and the more I've sought to know and understand God, the more I'm certain that doubts are essential to our maturity as believers. If we want a stronger faith, then we might be wise to allow our doubts to stand as

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we work through them instead of trying to chop them out of the way.

Judging from what I see in Scripture, I'm convinced that God honors those seekers who sincerely look for the truth, just like that boy's father who wanted to believe so badly that he asked God to help him overcome his unbelief (Mark 9:21–24). Maybe you can relate. You are like so many others who want to believe but feel like life has gotten in the way.

More than a third of the Psalms are prayers or songs of people in pain. These inspired poems often articulate our pain for us when we can't find the words.

Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint;  
heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.  
My soul is in deep anguish.  
How long, LORD, how long? . . .  
I am worn out from my groaning.  
All night long I flood my bed with weeping  
and drench my couch with tears.  
My eyes grow weak with sorrow;  
they fail because of all my foes.

—Psalm 6:2–3, 6–7

Can you relate to David's pain? He's exhausted. Worn out. Depressed. And alone. He has cried so many tears, he can't cry any more. It's not that he doesn't believe in God; he absolutely does. He is a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). David simply can't understand why the God who has the power to

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change his circumstances, the one who elevated him from a simple shepherd boy to the king of a nation, won't do it.

The authors of Job, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Jeremiah all express confusion, doubt, and the pain of unbearable suffering endured by faithful believers. Even Jesus questioned his Father's will in the garden of Gethsemane as he wrestled with accepting what he would have to suffer on the cross. And then, on the cross, he cried out in agony, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

Maybe in some strange way, God allows us to doubt him sometimes. Maybe he knows that's one of the ways for our faith to grow stronger. One of the best ways.

I understand that's a controversial statement, and you may disagree. But what brought me to that place was my own understanding of the Bible. In addition to the passages of Scripture I've just mentioned, there's one more passage that gives us permission to question God, if we're willing to listen to him in return.

More than 2,600 years ago, Habakkuk asked many of the same questions people all over the world are still asking today. And in his grace, God relieved some of Habakkuk's anguish, even as he left other questions unanswered. But on the other side of his doubts, Habakkuk grew into a person with a richer faith, a faith that may not have developed as fully had he not struggled through his doubts.

Think about it. If you understood everything completely and fully, you wouldn't need faith, would you? But without faith, it's impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). Why? Because

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faith and trust must emerge from love, not from a business relationship, a transaction, or some situation in which we have no choice.

Are you willing to ask honest questions? To wrestle?

And more important, are you willing to *listen* for God's answer?

## 1.2

# Why Don't You Care?

*I don't know if God exists, but it would be  
better for His reputation if He didn't.*

—Jules Renard

**M**ost of our crime shows and suspense films are based on the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. Now, before you think I'm crazy, hear me out. If you've watched any TV or movies in the past few years, then you've likely encountered some so-called antiheroes, people who do bad things even though they have good intentions.

On the big screen, we're no longer surprised when there's corruption in government or law enforcement. That's now a standard plot device. We even cheer when the ways that these antiheroes bend the rules ultimately bring the liars, cheaters, and murderers "to justice."

Why? Because, like them, we're tired of corrupt, immoral, unethical people getting away with their crimes. We're sick of bad guys, whether they're drug dealers bribing their way

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out of criminal charges or corporate executives pulling down seven-figure bonuses even as they eliminate thousands of jobs in their companies.

Maybe the reason we like all those superheroes glutting our local Cineplex is because they have the power to defeat villains who have no regard for human life or for playing by the rules. Captain America, Iron Man, and Thor all seem to be doing what we wish God would do sometimes but he doesn't. They don't call them the Avengers for nothing!

### INJUSTICE. CORRUPTION. INDIFFERENCE.

These have been problems almost since the beginning of creation. The prophet Habakkuk is not the first to point it out, but he's definitely one of the earliest and most passionate. Under the reign of King Jehoiakim, Habakkuk witnessed corruption, scandal, and violence that would have made the Godfather blush. Even among God's own people, disputes were often settled by revenge. Officials looked the other way while wealthy criminals dropped coins in their palms. Poor people were often falsely accused of and punished for crimes committed by their rich masters. As a result, some began taking matters into their own hands, not unlike the characters we cheer for on TV and in the movies. It was a mess.

It wasn't that different from our culture. Even if you're not dealing with something painful and unfair in your own life right now, you have to admit, it sure seems like what Habakkuk saw all around him still applies to us today.

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How long, LORD, must I call for help,  
but you do not listen?  
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"  
but you do not save?  
Why do you make me look at injustice?  
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?  
Destruction and violence are before me;  
there is strife, and conflict abounds.  
Therefore the law is paralyzed,  
and justice never prevails.  
The wicked hem in the righteous,  
so that justice is perverted.

—Habakkuk 1:2–4

I LOVE THE HONESTY IN HABAKKUK'S QUESTIONS: "How long must I cry for help? God, I *know* you can do something about this. Why don't you?" Habakkuk is reminding God that he's supposed to be a just God and yet he's tolerating the worst sort of violence and injustice.

How do you respond when you experience injustice?

Let's say you're certain you've earned a promotion at work, but your boss overlooks you in favor of someone less devoted. It's unfair. You want to quit, but you need the money. You're stuck.

Or you worked your tail into the ground on your final paper for a class. You're certain it's worthy of an A, so you

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can't believe your eyes when it comes back a C, dashing your hopes of getting into grad school.

Or you finally get the car you've always wanted, only to be surprised two days later by an eight-inch scratch down the side, courtesy of a lazy, sloppy parker.

MAYBE EXAMPLES LIKE THESE MAKE YOU MAD, BUT THEY'RE JUST things you've learned to accept. They're simply part of life. That's just the way the world works, right? But some other things aren't quite so easy to accept. Things that involve injustice beyond what you ever could have imagined. Deception. Manipulation. Betrayal.

Recently I talked to a friend who had been a faithful pastor for more than two decades. After raising four kids with his wife of almost thirty years, he came home one day to the shock of his life. His wife had decided she didn't want to be married anymore. An old high school flame had contacted her on Facebook. One thing led to another, and she had rekindled her relationship with the man "God had intended for her to marry in the first place."

After she left my friend, the elders at his church started talking. They agreed that in the wake of a scandal like that, he wasn't fit to lead the church. He could resign or be terminated: his "choice."

This poor, battered man sat in my office recounting his losses, and we cried together. He said, "I know God doesn't owe me anything, but now I have nothing. After serving him

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my entire adult life, how could he allow me to end up divorced and unemployed? It's just . . . just so unfair!"

I couldn't disagree.

Where was the God he had served for all those years? Where is God when someone steals from your business, but then, when they get caught, they declare bankruptcy, so you'll never get back the money they took?

Or what do you say to the wife from your small group at church who loses her husband—a loving, devoted, hardworking guy everyone liked—to a heart attack at age thirty-five? Especially when you think about how many arrogant, mean-spirited people you know who remain healthy and continue to live a long life?

Or what about when someone you loved and trusted for years betrays you? Everyone else thinks she's a strong Christian, which baffles you, because you can't understand how a decent person—much less a follower of Christ—would ever spread gossip about you based on what you confided to her as a prayer request.

Maybe you've tasted the bitterness of injustice firsthand. You did everything you could to raise your kids with love, gentle discipline, and the best you could provide, and yet they've crushed your heart. Even after you've given them your all, now they're addicted to drugs, stealing money from your dresser to get their next fix. All around you, your friends' children seem happy and successful, young professionals graduating from college, getting good jobs, going to church, getting married.

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Perhaps you've poured everything you can into your marriage, only to experience a betrayal so unexpected that it feels especially cruel. You thought you knew your spouse, but now . . . this? After all you've been through together, someone at work just had more to offer them? Seriously?

You're devastated, broken, and alone. It doesn't matter what the circumstances are. Sooner or later, we all experience the cruel blows of life. We get kicked in the gut or sucker punched on the chin. Our souls are left to bleed out on the floor.

Sure, you pray. You try to forgive. You read your Bible. You lean on the strong shoulders of your Christian friends and family. You pray some more.

But things only seem to get worse. Life's punches become relentless, one right after another. Your heart becomes battered and bruised, your soul scarred and scabbed with disappointment and sadness. You're numb with rage, paralyzed with grief.

You wonder, "Doesn't God care about what happens to me? Is he just going to let me drown in all these bad things? He's God, so surely he's powerful enough to do something, to change things. Why doesn't he?"

Habakkuk asked these same questions thousands of years ago.