

WHEN FAITH DISAPPOINTS

**THE GAP BETWEEN WHAT WE BELIEVE
AND WHAT WE EXPERIENCE**

LISA VICTORIA FIELDS



MULTNOMAH

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

A Multnomah Trade Paperback Original

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Fields, Lisa Victoria, author.

Title: When faith disappoints: the gap between what we believe and what we experience / Lisa Victoria Fields.

Description: Colorado Springs: Multnomah, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024000528 | ISBN 9780593601181 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780593601198 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Faith—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Christian life.

Classification: LCC BV4637 .F43 2024 | DDC 248.4—dc23/eng/20240216

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024000528>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

waterbrookmultnomah.com

987654321 [or] 246897531 [or] 123456789

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

Book design by *Jo Anne Metsch*

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*To my parents, Louis and Lisa L. Fields:
Your example, prayers, guidance, and love have
helped make me the woman I am today.
I love and appreciate you both.
I pray I make you proud.*

*To my granddaddy Louis Fields, Sr.:
I'm so thankful that you were such a good man.
I miss you and I love you. I am who I am today
partly because of the man you were. I was so
blessed to have you as a granddaddy.*

FOREWORD

Being human comes with disappointment built in. We simply can't avoid it. We might even say that experiencing disappointment, disillusionment, and discouragement is simply a nasty case of being normal. Still, these negative experiences often create a weather system all their own, and those downpours frequently wash away people's faith. There's a new name for this storm: deconstruction.

Perhaps you're wrestling with your faith—or you know someone who is and you want to help. Either way, you should know that you're not alone. If you're one of those struggling with disappointment, it really is okay to feel this way.

If you're walking alongside someone who is chafing under the weight of their questions, be patient. And pray! Doubt truly is a normal part of life.

I have the numbers to prove this. I lead a research company that explores the common themes of human experience. We study people's spiritual journeys. Our social research shows that half of adults (49 percent) say they have gone through a period when they significantly doubted their faith. One out of two adults (47 percent) agree that "My experiences have led me to deconstruct or take apart the faith of my youth." Just over two in five (43 percent) assert that "I am disillusioned by my experiences in Christian churches."

What's more, Millennials and Gen Z (roughly people age forty and under) are even more likely to express these sentiments. In their hurt, pain, and disappointment, younger generations' belief in God often swirls down the drain.

When I say you are not alone, it's not just the numbers talking.

I have walked my own painful journey of disappointment and disillusionment since Jill, my high school sweetheart and wife of twenty-five years, passed away from brain cancer. Those forty months of disease and death—and all that has followed—have taken me to the deepest places of my faith and my doubts. I've wrestled with God. I've shouted into the heavens to a God who seemed si-

lent. I've groaned and wept and poured out my soul in the aching chasm of loss.

Yet I've learned that Jesus is there through it all. We have a God who comforts us in our heartache and hardship. We follow a Master who bears our pain with us. And God is never scared of our questions and never wastes our suffering. The Christian Scriptures attest to this, and I found my heart pounding out of my chest at the way the Bible gave voice to—and didn't shy away from—my soul's insurmountable grief and extreme disappointment.

When my friend Lisa Fields asked me to write this foreword, I felt both overwhelmed and honored. Overwhelmed because talking about doubt and disappointment is so difficult and personal. We each have our own private battles, and I want to be helpful and kind—and to point you to Jesus.

I also felt so honored that Lisa asked me to introduce this book to you. I think the world of Lisa, and I am so glad you've picked up her book. In the vast landscape of resources on how to share the gospel, few voices resonate with a profound understanding of the human quest for connection with the divine. Lisa Fields's is such a voice, and in the pages that follow, you're about to join her on a journey into the intricacies of faith, doubt, and the relentless pursuit of truth.

Lisa invites us to question, to wrestle, and to explore the space between what we believe and what we experi-

ence. In doing so, she unveils a path that leads not away from God but toward a richer, more nuanced understanding of Him.

Lisa is rare in her ability to bridge the gap between the pulpit and the pew. Speaking to both leaders and everyday Christians, she explores the delicate terrain of disappointment with God, drawing from her own experiences and narratives of the Bible. Her words are simple, cogent, and powerful.

But Lisa doesn't stop at introspection; she also confronts pressing issues of our time. Systemic racism, the marginalization of the Black community—these are not merely topics in her book; they are lived realities she addresses with empathy. In the face of generational racism, Lisa offers a path forward—a call to trust in God as she grapples with the complexities of human history.

One of Lisa's compelling stories centers on the launch of Jude 3 Project. Her vision and mission is to help Black Christians know what they believe and why they believe it. With barely any funds, she faced crushing obstacles. She overcame harsh realities of bias, racism, and sexism in her pursuit of a mission larger than herself. Early on, she was told, "You're young, a woman, and Black," meaning her chances of succeeding in the white, male-dominated world of Christian apologetics were slim if not impossible.

Yet Lisa did succeed, with the Lord's help, and I am

inspired by her leadership!

Reading through the challenges she overcame, from fundraising hurdles to societal biases, from relational pain to struggles of identity, we witness a journey marked by storms. Yet, Lisa reveals every storm has a purpose—a means through which God shapes and refines us. As we navigate the headwinds of our own lives, she reminds us that each trial, every questioning moment, is an opportunity for growth, endurance, and, ultimately, a deeper connection with our Creator.

In these pages, Lisa Fields doesn't just share a story; she invites us into a conversation—a dialogue with doubt, faith, and the God who weaves through it all. It's a conversation that resonates, challenges, and, above all, illuminates the path toward a faith that withstands the powerful storms of doubt.

So, friend, buckle up for a journey that is as inspiring as it is authentic—a journey into the heart of faith, guided by the insightful words of Lisa Fields, a woman of tenacious faith who knows what she believes and why she believes it.

Hers is a rising voice we all benefit from hearing. I am honored to count her as a friend.

DAVID KINNAMAN, CEO of Barna

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PERMISSION TO WRESTLE

Believers should acknowledge and wrestle with doubts—not only their own but their friends’ and neighbors’.

—TIM KELLER, *The Reason for God*

When I was in seminary, I had a faith crisis. I heard a tragic story about terrorists murdering children in the Middle East. My heart was heavy. I don’t struggle as much with why God allows evil to happen to adults, but when children are targeted, I feel differently. They tug at my heartstrings.

I was deeply grieved and began to question God: *Why do You protect some and not others? How can I trust You?*

My mind was spinning, and these thoughts lingered for weeks, and I even found it challenging to read my Bible and pray.

Finally, I went to the office of my New Testament professor, Dr. Leo Percer, who was my favorite professor. I

appreciated his humility and kindness, so it was a no-brainer that I should seek his guidance.

I explained how I couldn't understand a God who would allow such evil to happen to innocent children. I knew all the arguments for the problem of evil. I could understand that we have free will and that it creates the reality of evil. I could also reason that God uses evil for greater purposes that are sometimes beyond our human understanding. But these logical explanations still left me emotionally unsatisfied. If I couldn't find an answer for why God allowed children to be murdered, then could I continue following Him? Could I keep my faith and trust Him? I paused, holding my breath while I awaited Dr. Percer's response.

He said, "I struggle with that too."

I exhaled. I had expected some deep philosophical or theological answer, but he gave me a very human response. He simply said, "Me too." I thought I was on the verge of losing my faith, but here was a respected professor—with years of knowledge and expertise—who wrestled too. Dr. Percer didn't say anything profound; he was honest about his struggle with God. He normalized my frustration.

Dr. Percer acknowledged that it *is* okay to question God when things happen that I don't understand. After all, my doubts aren't a reflection of my faith in Him. If I could understand everything about God, then I wouldn't

need faith. I still question God, and there are still things in the Bible that give me pause and times when I don't understand His ways. The only difference now is that I'm not afraid to ask the hard questions.

Have you ever questioned God? Did you worry that your faith would disappear because you wrestled with His will and His Word? I have good news for you: Wrestling isn't the death of your faith. On the contrary, wrestling is the key to growing in your faith.

Wrestling isn't the death of your faith.

One of my favorite Old Testament scholars, Dr. Jo Vitale, once told me that the way we get to know anyone is through questions and, if that's the case, why would our relationship with God be any different? The first thing we do when we meet someone new is ask them questions. The questions are not to disrespect the person but to get to know them. Similarly, we learn about God by questioning Him. The Bible is full of kings, prophets, and even our Savior wrestling with God.

In frustration, King David asked God,

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?¹

The prophet Jeremiah also had some questions for God:

LORD, you always give me justice
when I bring a case before you.
So let me bring you this complaint:
Why are the wicked so prosperous?
Why are evil people so happy?²

On the cross, even Jesus questioned God: “Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*’ which means ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’”³

You don’t have to fear offending Him by verbalizing your questions. He knows your heart and questions, even if you don’t voice them. He is your creator. You don’t have to be scared. You don’t need to run when it gets complicated; you can lean into the questions. God will meet you there.

EMOTIONS AND ANSWERS

In 2014, I founded an apologetics organization called Jude 3 Project that focused on equipping and engaging

the Black community. One of my favorite Jude 3 Project events is called Problematic Passages. It's a two-hour Q and A where the audience gets to question Bible scholars about the verses that trouble them. In addition to this, we had Dr. Esau Mccauley lecture on problematic passages, and he addressed genocide in the Bible. He brilliantly addressed this but made a crucial caveat that there is no answer to the question that will be emotionally satisfying.⁴ By that, he meant that no answer would make us feel good. And when we get an answer that doesn't make us feel good, we sometimes seek other answers.

As a teenager, I loved football video games. I'd play my favorite, *Madden NFL*, all day. I don't want to brag, but I got pretty good. For me, the highlight of the game was when I scored. As soon as I crossed the goal line, I knew I was closer to winning the game. The goal line is crucial—without it, football would just be people running around endlessly, with no way to determine a winner or the purpose of the game. Likewise, when we ask questions with no goal in sight, we'll never get a satisfactory answer.

I heard one apologist say that before he answers a question about faith, he asks, "If I answer this question to your satisfaction, will you accept Christ?" Why does he do that? He is trying to locate the goal line. He doesn't want to have a purposeless argument about faith; he wants the conversation to head in a particular direction.

Similarly, God doesn't want to argue aimlessly with you. He wants your questions to move you in a specific direction: toward deeper faith and trust in Him. God has a goal line for your questions. What kind of response are you hoping for? What would be a satisfactory answer for you? If you don't know where the goal line is, you'll roam with endless questions that lead nowhere.

MTV has a popular show called *Catfish*, which exposes internet impostors who create fake profiles to deceive people. A person who has formed an online relationship with an impostor wants to believe that the person behind the computer screen is who they claim to be. They've usually been in constant contact with the impostor, hearing consistent, emotionally satisfying stories and answers.

In many cases on the show, when the host presents evidence to the victim that they may have been catfished, the victim denies it. They've been so emotionally satisfied by the lie that they reject the logic of the truth. When they finally accept the facts, they are devastated and hurt. The truth didn't make them happy; it actually made them sad. But while the truth wasn't emotionally satisfying, it did liberate them from the lies and manipulation.

There can be logical answers to your questions about what God allows and why some people seem protected from things while others don't. The logic won't always soothe your heart; however, an answer doesn't need to be emotionally gratifying to be true. You may still feel pain

and confusion, but the truth will always liberate you.

As we dive into the various ways we wrestle with God—our pain points—and how they influence our view of Him and our faith, remember that our goal line doesn't equate to answers that are emotionally satisfying. The pain and suffering we experience from life sometimes short-circuit our ability to reason well. Keeping in mind the complexities of how we feel about the truth and the traumas we experience will help us set up a framework as we wrestle with God. Because our goal line is truth and liberation in the gap between what we believe and what we experience.

WHAT IS A PAIN POINT?

A pain point is a complaint. It's an expressed or unexpressed issue a person has with a product, service, or experience. In the business world, CEOs—along with their sales, product development, and customer service teams—devote most of their time and expertise to eliminating any pain points their current or future customers may face. They work diligently, observing every angle of the customer experience. From quality and pricing to product accessibility and delivery, they do everything in their power to ensure their customer has a five-star experience that brings them back for more and prompts them to

share their positive experience with others.

One company that has done this exceptionally well is Amazon. In 2021, their vision was “to be Earth’s most customer-centric company, where customers can find and discover anything they might want to buy online, and endeavours to offer its consumers the lowest possible prices.”⁵ Can you hear the pain points they’re seeking to avoid? They don’t want their customers to be able to complain that they didn’t find what they were looking for or that what they found was too expensive. And though not mentioned in their vision statement, their one- to two-day delivery turnaround shows they want to avoid any complaints about it taking too long for products to arrive. By making it their goal to eliminate every pain point a customer could ever experience through an on-line delivery service, in 2021 they triumphed over Walmart and became the world’s largest retailer outside China.⁶

I often wish God were more like Amazon. I wish He would use His all-knowing, ever-present, and all-powerful qualities to eliminate every kind of difficulty. I want to look at Jude 3 Project—the ministry He has called me to—and tangibly sense that He used His foreknowledge to remove my pain points.

I doubt I’m the only one who feels this way. In fact, I’m certain I’m not. The entire field of apologetics (the theological discipline that helps people give a defense for

their faith) exists to address pain points. Though these pain points are presented as philosophical questions, what often lies behind these questions are complaints. For example, behind the question “Why would a good, all-powerful God allow bad things to happen?” is the complaint “God didn’t intervene and protect.” And there are times when what lies behind questions about sex and sexuality is the complaint “God, Your standards for sexual purity are unreasonably archaic!” or “Why do I have to deny myself something that feels good?” These complaints are pain points.

Over the years, I’ve come alongside hurting Christians, listened to their pains, and had deep, theological conversations with them. From these talks, I’ve identified seven common categories of pain points within Christianity, which I’ll discuss in individual chapters:

- Personhood (Who am I?)
- Peace (How can I experience a sound mind and tranquility?)
- Provision (How will my needs be met?)
- Pleasure (How can I feel good?)
- Purpose (Why am I here?)
- Protection (How can I be safe?)
- Power (How can I be in control?)

Many have looked to Christianity to answer one or

more of these questions. And rightly so. How could we not when the preachers encourage us to find our identity in Christ and we read stories in the Bible about Christ miraculously healing men and women of every kind of disease and feeding more than five thousand people with two fish and five loaves of bread?⁷ Is the God of the Bible not full of power? Aren't we to look to Him for peace? Didn't the psalmist say that in His presence is "fullness of joy"?⁸ If so, why are Black and Brown people in my country continually oppressed? Why is my parent dying from cancer? Why am I being told to contain my sexuality when it's a big part of how I understand and express myself? However, the object of our discontent is not a product but a Person whose services aren't measuring up to our expectations or yielding the experience we hoped for.

Pain points exist in the gap between a person's expectations of Christianity and their experience of it—when their faith has disappointed them and they are left wrestling with God. They turned to God because of His promise to give joy, but He doesn't seem to answer, because still daily they are battling with depression and isolation. They walked down the aisle to say the prayer of salvation because the pastor told them God wants them to prosper. Then, three to six months later, they find themselves evicted. Out of frustration, they wave their fist at God. Out of hopelessness, they try to discern what they

got wrong about Him. They pack their belongings in their car, wondering if the resurrection of Jesus is all a big lie and if God can really make their life better. Does God really keep His word? Is faith in Jesus sufficient for life in a broken world? Does He have any relevance? Does the Cross offer any hope?

To eliminate the pain points, some people have either reframed the Christian faith to suit their needs or left it altogether. Those who have reframed it have created a buffet style faith. They pick the doctrines and passages in Scripture that they agree with and disregard the rest. Those who have left the faith have stopped trying to reconcile Christianity with their unmet expectations and unanswered prayers, concluding that Christianity doesn't work. Some have even respectfully commented, "Christianity might work for others, but it doesn't work for me." So they've turned to other religious systems and practices to fulfill their need for personhood, peace, provision, pleasure, purpose, protection, and power.

If you find yourself in either of those categories, I want you to know that the goal of this book isn't to criticize or condemn you. Instead, I invite you to reconsider. In the following chapters, we'll explore how the pain points affect us and how rethinking our perceptions of God and Scripture can help us reframe our pain.

Full disclosure: My goal line is also not to *eliminate* the pain points you have with God. As much as I'd like this

book to help you completely get rid of your pain points with God, I can't. It would be inaccurate and deceptive of me to make such a declaration since Jesus never promised a life free of pain in exchange for following Him. Remember, He told His disciples: "In this world you will have trouble."⁹ And as someone who believes we live in a fallen world, I've come to accept that I'll wrestle with God in each of these areas until Christ returns and heals all.

As we walk through these pain points, I hope that you'll feel affirmed in your frustration. I hope that the concepts laid out in each chapter will help alleviate them—make your pain or frustration less severe. And I hope that as we address each pain point and engage with the truths of Scripture, you'll no longer feel the need to reframe or reject those truths in an attempt to meet your very valid needs for personhood, peace, provision, pleasure, purpose, protection, and power. I pray that the truth God gave through His Word will result in hope and a resolve to move forward, clinging to a faith that is not only intellectually sound but also growing.

PRAYER

God,

I don't even know if You're real anymore. I don't know if I made You up and You're just a figment of my imagination. But if You are real, would You prove it to me? I hate to be like Thomas in the Bible, but I need something in order to keep going. I don't want to give up on You, but believing becomes more challenging by the day.

God, please reveal Yourself to me as I read the pages of this book and wrestle with my doubts and pain.

In Jesus's name, amen.