

The Lie: "It's All Your Fault"

Doubt—not fashionable skepticism, but *really* doubting what you were always so certain of. Many of us—maybe most of us—get there sooner or later.

Perhaps it was a big catastrophe or (and I think more commonly) a line of smaller things that creep in over time, complicate faith, and make us a lot less certain than we used to be.

But whatever the reason(s), when we feel that moment coming on, what do we do? We try to push that feeling down, hoping it will eventually go away before God notices.

It doesn't and God does.

Feeling our familiar faith unravel is unsettling, disorienting, exhausting, and even frightening.

Where did all this come from, and how can I get back to normal?

There must be something very wrong with me.

Maybe I'm not smart enough.

Maybe I'm a faker and finally being found out.

Maybe I haven't memorized enough Bible verses.

Maybe I need to go to church more often.

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Whatever the reason, our reflex is to assume we are doing something wrong: "It's all my fault. God must be so disappointed in me. I'm so weak."

So we do the only thing we know how to do, what we've been conditioned to do. We roll up our sleeves and do everything in our power to get out of that state of uncertainty and back to a normal state of rock-solid certainty as quickly as we can; our faith is broken, and it needs to be fixed. Then, when we have our act together and feel we can face God again without shame, we'll jump back into the way things were before, how they're supposed to be.

If none of that works, if doubt holds on too long, here are our choices: live a life of quiet and wretched desperation, shamed or afraid to speak up, or cash in our God chips, press factory reset, and move on.

But doubt is not the enemy of faith, a solely destructive force that rips us away from God, a dark cloud that blocks the bright warm sun of faith. Doubt is only the enemy of faith when we equate faith with certainty in our thinking.

Doubt is what being cornered by our thinking looks like. Doubt happens when needing to be certain has run its course.

Doubt can certainly leave us empty and frightened, but that is precisely the benefit of doubt: it exposes the folly that strong faith means you need to "know what you believe," that the more faith you "have," the more certain you are.

Doubt means spiritual relocation is happening. It's God's way of saying, "Time to move on."

Doubt is powerful. It can do things spiritually that must be done that we would never do on our own. Doubt has a way of forcing our hand and confronting us with the challenge of deeper trust in God,

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rather than leaning on the ideas we have been holding in our minds about God. Doubt exposes our frail thinking.

We might be accustomed to thinking of our faith as a castle—where we go to be safe and protected. That's a good place to be, and we all need that experience now and then. But what if God isn't a helicopter parent? What if feeling safe and secure isn't always a sign of God's presence but a pattern of fear that keeps God at a distance? And what if God wants to close that gap, for our sake, and doubt helps get us there? Doubt isn't a sign of spiritual weakness but the first steps toward a deeper faith.

Doubt tears down the castle walls we have built, with the false security and permanence they give, and forces us outside to walk a lonely, trying, yet cleansing road. In those times, it definitely feels like God is against us, far away, or absent altogether. But what if the darkness is actually a moment of God's presence that *seems* like absence, a gift of God to help us grow up out of our little ideas of God?

Doubting God is painful and frightening because we think we are leaving God behind, when in fact we are only leaving behind ideas about God that we are used to surrounding ourselves with—the small God, the God within our control, the God who moves in our circles, the God who agrees with us.

Doubt strips away distraction so we can see more clearly the inadequacies of who we think God is and move us from the foolishness of thinking that *our* god is *the* God.

Many of us, I would imagine, think we have God figured out pretty well—and for people like me, who get paid to tell people what God is like, it's an occupational hazard. We read the Bible and are able to quote it to others. We go to church like clockwork and get

involved in groups and service projects. We're doing great, and God must surely be impressed.

It is so easy to slip into "right thinking" mode—that we have arrived at full faith. We know what church God goes to, what Bible translation God prefers, how God votes, what movies God watches, and what books God reads. We know the kinds of people God approves of. God has winners and losers, and we are the winners, the true insiders. God likes all the things we like. We speak for God and think nothing of it.

All Christians I've ever met who take their faith seriously sooner or later get caught up in thinking that God really is what we think God is, that there is little more worth learning about the Creator of the cosmos. God becomes the face in the mirror.

By his mercy, God doesn't leave us there.

The Truth: "God Wants You Dead"

Doubt signals not God's death but the need for our own—to die to the theology we hold to with clenched fists. Our first creeping feelings of doubt are like the distant toll of a graveyard chapel, alerting us that the dying process is coming our way.

God wants us dead. Or better: God wants us to get used to the need to die, not once, but as a pattern for our lives.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells his followers to take up their crosses and lose their lives so they can find them.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:37-39)

Jesus isn't antifamily, telling his audience to blow off mom, dad, or the kids and spend all their time walking two steps behind Jesus. Jesus is making an in-your-face point, as he often does.

At the end of the day, what is (or should be) most dear to us? When our light begins to fade and when we come to the end of our lives, what is most likely to be on our minds? Family, those on Earth we are connected to more closely than anyone; when they suffer, we suffer; when they die, we are torn apart; when they triumph, we rejoice.

Following Jesus doesn't mean making a decision to literally hate our families. He means that following him requires an overhaul of our most basic, otherwise-unquestioned, top priorities—those things we cling to, including our thinking. Pitting family against the kingdom of God gets across how drastic and unsettling that overhaul is.

As does "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." A cross is certainly a heavy piece of wood, and most people have seen enough Jesus movies with him beaten, sweaty, and bloodied, struggling to carry his cross through the streets and up to Golgotha to be crucified.

Crosses are heavy, yes, but that's not the point. You don't take up a cross simply to carry it. You take up your cross to die on it. That's the point of crosses.

Following Jesus isn't like a burden we carry on our shoulders. It's an internal process so radical and painful that the best way to describe it for people of that day is as the act of being bound and nailed like a criminal to a piece of wood lifted above the ground where you are left hanging in naked humiliation and intense pain until you suffocate.

And that's a far cry from the claim of some relevangelists that "Jesus wants to make you rich and successful." Jesus wants to make us whole. That requires a process up for the challenge.

Physical death is the final letting go that we all experience with loved ones and that we will ourselves experience one day. Dying now the way Jesus says to means letting go already of every comfort, familiarity, joy, and sorrow—and of the false sense of control those things give us. Letting go of these things is a dying process.

Jesus sounds more like a mystic than an intellectual lining up correct thinking.

We have to die, and the choice is ours. If we don't, we are still holding on to something. And if we are holding on, we aren't really following. Just sort of following. Standing around.

[Oh God, what did I sign up for? This Christianity thing is hard. Deep breath . . .]

The apostle Paul chimes in, too:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. (Galatians 2:19–20)*

The life of Christian faith is more than agreeing with a set of beliefs about Christ, morality, or how to read the Bible. It means being so intimately connected to Christ that his crucifixion is ours, his death is our death, and his life is our life—which is hardly something we can grasp with our minds. It has to be experienced. It is an experience.

We're so crucified, in fact, that we read elsewhere, "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). Our lives are hidden—strong language, like we're not even in the picture.

* English translations of this passage tend to be too wordy and smooth over Paul's rugged and urgent prose. A better rendering is, "I have been crucified with Christ. I no longer live; Christ lives in me."

And being hidden with Christ and being "in" God sounds downright mystical enough to unsettle—as it should—anyone who thinks that the Christian's first duty is to make sure to think the right thoughts.

And all this talk of dying and being crucified and hidden doesn't describe a one-time moment of conversion when we "become Christians," as if that's final. If things were only that easy—a one-time transaction of "accepting Jesus" and then it's over. Dying describes a mode of existence we agree to once we enter the holy space of being a follower of Jesus—surrendering control, dying, all the time.

[Oh God, this is so much easier to write about than to do. Keep writing . . . keep writing . . .]

Dying is the normal mode of Christian existence, a pattern of life, what followers of Jesus are to do not just once but every day, every moment. It is certainly not a problem to be fixed so we can return to "normal," as we were.

The choice is always and ever before us: whether we will hold on right here and now to what is dear, to what we know, to the familiar and safe, to twist and bend all of our experiences of God into our own shape, to paint God's image according to our own blurred and sorry self-portraits—or whether we let go of frantic thoughts, die to ourselves, and let God bring us back to life in God's way and time.

That's what Paul is after. Dying leads to real living—"Christ who lives in me," a life so deeply connected to the divine that we no longer live, but our lives are "hidden with Christ in God."

Dying "with" Jesus leads to new life now, what Paul calls a movement "from death to life" (Romans 6:1–14). This is good news, the best news. When we "die," God doesn't leave us dead. God brings us back to life—"raising us from the dead," as Paul puts it. We die in order to be raised, and not just in a future one-day-at-the-end-of-the-

world way we talk about at funerals. Dying and rising is how followers of Jesus live and experience God in the present.

Being "saved" by God is an ongoing process of growth and transformation, of dying and rising, of being "conformed to the image of his [God's] Son," as Paul puts it (Romans 8:29). Following Jesus means experiencing the taste of resurrection and ascension now—whether doing laundry, paying bills, or leading nations.

Getting there is all about dying, and each cycle of dying and rising we come to in our lives brings us, I believe, to greater insight into our deep selves, where Christ lives "in us" and our lives are "hidden" in God.

Of course, we all know that dying, rising again, Christ in me, hidden in God, seated in heaven are metaphors—the use of common language to grasp the uncommon, a reality too deep and thick for conventional vocabulary. Following Jesus is an inside-out transformation so thorough that dying and coming back to life is the only adequate way to put it.

Doubt signals that this process of dying and rising is underway. Though God feels far away, at that moment God may be closer than we realize—especially if "know what you believe" is how we're used to thinking of our faith.

Doubt isn't cool, hipster, or chic. Doubt isn't a new source of pride. Don't go looking for doubt; don't tempt it to arrive out of time. But neither is doubt the terrifying final word.

Doubt is sacred. Doubt is God's instrument, will arrive in God's time, and will come from unexpected places—places out of your control. And when it does, resist the fight-or-flight impulse. Pass through it—patiently, honestly, and courageously for however long it takes. True transformation takes time.

Being conscious of this process does not relieve the pain of doubt, but it may help circumnavigate our corrupted instinct, which is to fear doubt as the enemy to be slain. Rather, supported by people we trust not to judge us, we work on welcoming the process as a gift—which is hard to do when our entire life narrative is falling down around us. But we are learning in that season, as Qohélet did, to *trust* God *anyway* and not to trust our "correct" thinking about God.

Doubt is divine tough love. God means to have all of us, not just the surface, going-to-church, volunteering part. Not just the part people see, but the parts so buried no one sees them.

Not even us.

Down the Mine Shaft

The dark places of the Bible—Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Job—are valuable to us because they connect with the dark places of our souls. So let me say once again thank you to these parts of the Bible. You give us all permission to not fake it in our uh-oh moments.

But so many feel like they have to fake it.

They have heard sermons and lessons their whole lives where they were taught to think of the world in a certain “Christian” way, and then maybe in high school, maybe in college, they begin to see that life is more complicated and God doesn’t work according to the plan. So a major disconnect rises up between what they had been taught and what they see. Their faith is no longer a convincing way of explaining the world, and so they leave it.

But we are pilgrims and have a lot in common with other pilgrims who also felt God’s absence right in the Bible.

And then there’s Jesus. On the cross, Jesus experienced the kind of dying we are talking about here and that is sure to come our way: God’s abandonment—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). No last-minute rescue. There couldn’t be.

For Jesus, as for us, abandonment had to happen. Our period of doubt, where God seems absent or in hiding, move us by God’s grace further on in the journey, even when we may feel like we’ve left the path altogether. We are at that moment following the path that Jesus blazed.

Feeling abandoned by God may make us more like Jesus than when things are floating along swimmingly.

I first encountered this way of processing faith when I was introduced by some friends to the “dark night of the soul” and two sixteenth-century Spanish mystics, St. John of the Cross and his mentor Teresa of Avila.

The dark night is the unrelenting sense of painful alienation and distance from God felt as distress, anxiety, discouragement, despair, and depression—and I’ve learned that it’s a lot more common among us than we might feel comfortable admitting. Some experience this darkness more intensely than others, some for longer times than others. But the feeling is the same: they lose a sense of closeness to God and conclude that they no longer “have faith.” And so they despair even more.

St. John’s insight, which has meant a lot to me, is that the dark night is a special sign of God’s presence. Our false god is being stripped away, and we are left empty—with none of the familiar ideas of God that we create to prop us up. The dark night takes away the background noise we have created in our lives in order to prepare us to hear God’s voice later on—in God’s time.

When the dark night comes upon us, we are being invited to surrender to God and trust him *anyway*. And, of course, this is very hard to do and leads us to why it’s called a *dark* night in the first place: we have no control over what is happening. We all want to stay

in control, especially people like me with the whole German type A personality thing going on. Darkness takes control away from us—which we hate.

I have several phobias. Here's one of them.

Imagine you're hiking along a wooded trail, and you come to an opening in the rocks—a mine shaft. You poke your head in and see a railroad car empty and resting on the tracks. You climb in to see what it feels like, which sounds like a good idea at the time—until your shifting weight nudges the car forward.

Before you even know what is happening, you're gathering speed. Within moments, the car is going too fast to jump out. Plus, now it's dark, and you can't see a thing. You're struck and begin to panic. Where is this thing taking you? All you know is you're going down, you're probably going to die, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Soon you find that what you used to call "dark" gets even darker. You go on like this, faster and faster, deeper and deeper, for who knows how long, minutes that seem like hours. But then the slope begins to even out and the car slows before coming to an even stop.

You are now completely alone in a cave, far, far beneath the familiar surface. Probably thousands of feet down. All around you is a silence you never knew was possible, enough to hear the blood squishing through your veins. And it's so dark that the "pitch darkness" of even a secluded cabin would literally be a welcome sight.

You are completely disoriented. You have no sense of your surroundings—where the walls are, where the ground rises or falls. Unless you have the emotional capacity of a shrimp, you'd be scared out of your mind—maybe having a panic attack. "No problem, I got this; I'll just sit here and work this out" isn't part of your thinking process right now.

And finding a way out seems hopeless. You're just wondering whether you should risk moving at all. Eventually, you try to grope about on your knees, then take a few steps, gingerly at first, one way, then the other. Soon you realize that wherever you are, it's vast, dark, and flat, and you can't do anything about it. And you'd give an eye and a lung for a flashlight.

You are out of control. The dark controls *you*. That's what dark does.

Okay, that's a made-up story. Here's a real one—which changed my perspective on faith about as much as anything I can remember.

In 1975 the Jesuit philosopher John Kavanaugh went to work for three months at the Home for the Dying in Calcutta, India, with Mother Teresa. He was searching for an answer to his spiritual struggles. On his very first morning there, he met Mother Teresa.

"And what can I do for you?" she asked.

Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him.

"What do you want me to pray for?" she asked.

He answered with what I'm sure he felt was a perfectly reasonable and humble request, in fact the very reason for which he traveled thousands of miles to India in the first place: "Pray that I have clarity."

"No. I will not do that."

Kavanaugh asked her why.

"Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of."

"But you always seem to have clarity."

Mother Teresa laughed. "I have never had clarity. What I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God."

The first time I read this well-known story I was passing through my own loss of clarity, and God was a no-show in my life. I was like

John Kavanaugh—a “clinger,” holding on to clarity so I could diagnose what the problem was, fix it, and move forward.

Wanting clarity is seeking some sort of control. A flashlight in the mine shaft. That’s “all” I wanted. It doesn’t even have to be on all the time. Just when I need it so I can get my bearings. I can handle this dark night, but on my terms.

But this is the dark night. No bearings for you. Then it wouldn’t be dark anymore.

Darkness takes away control, what Thomas Keating and others call the “ego,” that part of us that simply has to be in charge of our lives. That part that wants to cling to life, whereas Jesus says every part of us needs to die—especially the part that wants to retain control.

The darkness does us a favor by exposing control as an illusion. When everything is removed, “Where can I take back some control here?” eventually ceases being the active question and is replaced with a plea: “Lord, help me let go of control. Help me die. Help me trust.”

That choice, it seems to me, sums up the life of Christian faith. And that is so very hard—and if anyone tells you Christianity is a crutch, you should take one of those crutches and beat him over the head with it (in Christian love, of course, making sure to tell them you will be praying for a quick recovery).

And you know, maybe that mine-shaft car doesn’t come loose on its own. Maybe God nudges it a bit.

Let’s Bring This Aboveground

If you’re guilt stricken because you harbor doubts and just can’t seem to have your act together and be a happy Christian like your roommate or that lady in church, listen to Mother Teresa. According to her own journal, she was in her dark night more or less from 1948 until near the time of her death in 1997.

And all those noble and self-sacrificial things she did, things that may have made her one of the few public religious leaders who’s never been the subject of an *SNL* skit or a *Daily Show* takedown. Perhaps her long dark night fueled her life, where she kept moving anyway, as an act of trust so deep it cannot be rationally explained—and indeed would look foolish if anyone tried. And the result was about as clear a Jesus movement as you can point to in recent history. Mother Teresa learned trust—not clarity, not certainty, but trust in God. And all of that poured out to the people around her.

I’ve heard it said many times: “Let go and let God.” Or as the hymn says, “All to Jesus I surrender, all to him I freely give.” But “letting go” and “surrendering all” might be more than we bargained for, and not something we can easily pull off on our own steam, nor