YOU CAN TRUST A GOD WITH SCARS

FAITH (AND DOUBT) FOR THE SEARCHING SOUL

JARED AYERS

Any of us who have found ourselves in "the borderlands between faith and doubt" or suffering from church fatigue or unsure what to make of biblical claims will find in these stories and reflections a hospitable invitation to take a long second look. Maybe even to venture through the doors of a church. Jared Ayers meets readers in the shadowy places of uncertainty not with arguments but with stories that help even the deeply disenchanted reimagine a life in which faith is sustaining and a vigorous community of thoughtful believers is possible.

Marilyn McEntyre, speaker, professor, and author of numerous books, including *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, *Word by Word*, *Dear Doctor*, and more

Jared's book is a compelling look at how Christians engage wisely and winsomely in this cultural moment. Jared's exceptional writing, engaging storytelling, and deep experience as a pastor and church planter offer connection and credibility to readers. I'm very excited to promote this book as it's being birthed into the world.

Chuck DeGroat, professor of pastoral care and Christian spirituality at Western Theological Seminary and author of *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, *Toughest People to Love*, *Wholeheartedness*, and more

In an age of disillusionment and disenchantment, we need wise pastoral voices who bring a curious mind, an awakened heart, and a lively, compassionate pen to our many perplexing questions. We need voices like Jared Ayers's, and I'm excited to support the work he's creating and the beautiful gospel it evokes.

Winn Collier, director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination at Western Theological Seminary and author of *A Burning in My Bones*; *Love Big, Be Well*; and more

Jared Ayers says this is a book for those on the borderlands of faith. He is qualified to say this because (1) he wrote it and (2) he has spent an enormous amount of time with people there and knows what he's talking about. But as I read, I kept thinking, *This is a book for the church*. Jared knows the gospel. Knows the beauty and power of what has been entrusted to a community of faith. And in an age of disillusionment with and confusion about what the gospel actually is, Jared, a sage, scholar, and warmhearted pastor, is giving it to us all over again—pressed down, shaken together, and running over. This is a book for both the church and those at the borderlands. A book to be savored.

Andrew Arndt, author of *A Strange and Gracious Light* and more

Who knew that a book of theology could be written with such wit and wisdom? Who knew that a book of pastoral ministry could brim with thoughtful, perceptive, and wise insights? This book is both. The combination of theology and pastoral wisdom here is compelling in our present context of deep anxiety and confusion. Jared Ayers offers a fresh telling of the Christian story and connects it at every turn with real people's real lives. It is a book for people who believe, who doubt, who question, and who yearn.

Leanne Van Dyk, president emerita of Columbia Theological Seminary

Clear, compelling, and propelled by a soaring Christology, Jared Ayers breathes fresh air into the fathomless mystery of what it means to have a wounded healer God on our side. For a doubting, cynical generation, this pastoral, humble, persuasive voice is a giant step forward in the journey of faith seeking understanding.

Eric E. Peterson, founding pastor of Colbert Presbyterian Church

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

For Those Who Fret about It

For a guy who sees no point in existence, you sure fret about it an awful lot.

Marty Hart in ***TRUE DETECTIVE***

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new,
late have I loved you!
Lo, you were within,
but I outside, seeking there for you,
and upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong,
I, misshapen.
You were with me, but I was not with you.

AUGUSTINE, *The Confessions*

My wife, Monica, and I have very different tastes in film, television, and literature, and mine tends to be significantly darker than hers. One evening several years ago on summer vacation at the Jersey Shore, after tucking our children into bed, I suggested we give the award-winning crime-noir television series *True Detective* a watch together. She made it ten minutes or so before informing me that if I wanted to continue watching, I'd be doing so alone.

And I did.

I binge-watched the eight episodes of *True Detective*'s inaugural season over the next thirty-six hours or so. Set in Vermilion Parish, a backwater precinct in rural Louisiana, the

show centers on the relationship of state homicide detectives Marty Hart (played by Woody Harrelson) and Rust Cohle (played by Matthew McConaughey). Cohle is both intelligent and deeply troubled and has just transferred to the area after working undercover in a narcotics unit in Texas. His philosophizing and haunting nihilism immediately grate on Marty Hart, a lifelong local whose uncritical adherence to Bible-belt Christianity papers over his midlife restlessness, gnawing appetites, and marital infidelity. Harrelson and McConaughey's chemistry creates complex characters who over the arc of the series bristle at, cross, and eventually embrace each other.

One of my favorite moments of the series unfolds as Cohle and Hart set out to solve the murder of a young prostitute. As they follow leads, they stop at an outdoor revival service. Standing aloof at the edge of the tent, Rust Cohle surveys the crowd, scowling, and says, "What do you think the average IQ of this group is?"

Marty is taken aback: "What do you know about these people?" To which Cohle, continuing to look around, deadpan, replies, "Just observation and deduction: I see a propensity for obesity, poverty, a yen for fairy tales. Folks putting what few bucks they do have in the little wicker baskets being passed around. I think it's safe to say that nobody here is going to be splitting the atom, Marty."

They continue to argue under their breath at the edge of the crowd, and Cohle presses: "What's it say about life that you've got to get together, tell yourself stories that violate every law of the universe, just to get through the **** day?"

They continue to argue, and before he walks away, Marty turns to Rust and remarks, "Well, I don't use ten-dollar words

as much as you. But for a guy who sees no point in existence, you sure fret about it an awful lot."[1]

This is a book for those who see no point in existence.

This is a book for those who fret about it.

And this book is for everybody who does some of both.

For much of my pastoral life, I've conversed in living rooms, on park benches, and in bars and cafés with people wondering about the Christian faith, curious about what it would mean to become a Christian or struggling with whether they can stay one.

The questions we ask in the borderlands between faith and doubt are as old as humanity. And many of them are written right into the text of the Scriptures. Listen, for example, to the ancient prayers set at the center of the Bible, the Psalms. Christians believe that Scripture is the Word of the Lord, God's discourse to the world in Christ Jesus. But the Psalms, uniquely, are both Holy Scripture and human praying—God's Word to us, and our words to God.[2]

And these canonized prayers gather up the big questions we ask and bring them to honest expression.

There are the anguished prayers of those who wonder if God's forgotten them:

> How long, O LORD, will You forget me always?
> How long hide Your face from me?[3]

And there are invocations that name the cruel unfairness of life—how it is that the corrupt enjoy lives of ease while good people suffer?

I envied the revelers,
    I saw the wicked's well-being:
"For they are free of the fetters of death,
    and their body is healthy.
Of the torment of man they have no part,
    and they know not human afflictions."[4]

There's even the canonized cry of someone who feels forsaken by God entirely, who screams their supplication up at a silent sky and hears nothing in return:

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?
    Far from my rescue are the words that I roar.
My God, I call out by day and You do not answer,
    by night—no stillness for me.[5]

It is this derelict outburst that Jesus himself prays, in fact, as he comes to his end on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[6] Jesus, whom we Christians believe to be the human embodiment of the God we pray to, prays this very outburst of honest anguish. In his life, the masses flocked to Jesus for answers; but at his crucifixion, Jesus died asking our questions.

Doubt and disbelief are there as well, from the earliest Easter beginnings of the Christian movement. In the Gospel accounts of the first Easter morning, a solemn parade of bleary-eyed mourners make their way to Jesus' tomb in the predawn blackness. In Luke's version, several women arrive at the tomb with burial spices and embalming ointments, intending simply to offer their Teacher the dignity in death he was stripped of in his cruel crucifixion. But they don't

find what they expect (the body of Jesus), and they discover what they couldn't have expected: two angelic figures, dressed in dazzling light, making the astonishing announcement that becomes the heart of the Christian gospel: "He is not here, but has risen."[7]

The women run, breathless, back to the eleven disciples who form Jesus' inner circle and who will go on to comprise the leadership of the Christian church. And what is their first response to the Good News of Easter? "These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."[8] English translators are actually kinder to the disciples here than Luke himself is: In Greek, the language this part of the Bible was originally authored in, the word often translated in English as "idle tale" is *lēros*, which means something more like "BS." The disciples, who became the first believers in the risen Jesus, were first the first disbelievers in Jesus.

Several years ago, someone stirred up controversy on Yale University's campus by placing a cross on its grounds during Holy Week, replacing the Latin letters *INRI* traditionally found in Christian artwork (which mean "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews") with the letters *ROFL* (slang shorthand for "rolling on the floor laughing").The cross created the predictable controversies about culture wars and free speech, but when I read this story, I was struck by the irony that this was actually closer to the initial response of the first Christians themselves to the Christian gospel.

"Lēros."

"BS."

"Fake news."

"ROFL."

EVERYBODY KNEW SOMEBODY

The winding journey through the terrain between doubt and faith is a trek humanity has long taken. And yet, in the twenty-first century, increasing numbers of would-be Christians, former believers, and those disaffected by the Christian church become mired as well by their struggle over the deep harm inflicted by the Christian church herself.

Peter and Jim[9] were my landlords for a couple of years; they owned the first apartment Monica and I called home when we lived in Philadelphia. We quickly became friends, and over glasses of pinot noir around the circle of chairs they'd gather on the sidewalk in front of their row home on Philadelphia's sticky summer nights, I gradually began to learn their stories. Both Peter and Jim were vaguely spiritual, and both also had a deep aversion to Christian institutions. As I asked why, they went on to tell me about life growing up in Italian, Catholic neighborhoods in midcentury South Philly. "In those days," Peter told me, "priests abusing boys in the neighborhood was an open secret. Everybody knew somebody." Though they hadn't themselves suffered abuse, they'd watched schoolmates and neighbors be victimized by the church's leaders—and that had left lasting damage in their lives.

It's only in the last couple of decades that we've come to realize how widespread stories like Peter and Jim's really are. In 2002, a group of journalists at *The Boston Globe*, mostly Roman Catholic themselves, broke a story about Cardinal Bernard Law knowingly covering up clergy sexual abuse in his Boston parishes.[10] Their reporting wound up winning a Pulitzer Prize—and it also touched off what has become a reckoning for the

Roman Catholic Church in almost all of America's big cities and in parishes around the world.

And it's by no means only Roman Catholic Christians who bear the scars of harm done in and by the church. The Protestant church has its own ugly history with which to contend as well. The church in America has been complicit in chattel slavery, practiced and endorsed race-based segregation, and been party to its own share of physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual abuses. In the last several years, headlines around the country have been filled with one high-profile Christian leader after another caught up in scandal and disgrace. As I write these words, yet another well-known pastor is currently making headlines for the way his church defended a teacher at their school who had been convicted of multiple accounts of abuse and the fact that they also excommunicated the man's wife for separating from her husband.[11] The widespread reality of this ugliness—the hypocrisy, dysfunction, and abuse often found in the church—make many feel as if they can no longer associate themselves with the Christian faith.

A CONVERSATION WITH MYSELF

Not only is this book a collection of conversations I've had with friends, neighbors, and congregants as they've migrated between faith and doubt, but it also encompasses internal dialogue from my own meandering journey.

Honest intellectual inquiry and back-and-forth dialogue with good friends who see the world very differently than I do has precipitated plenty of fretting.

What if my whole system of beliefs is mistaken?

What if I've built my whole life on an outdated fairy tale?

Twenty-odd years spent as a pastor has meant that I've collected more than a few scars from the ugliness of religious people too—the hypocrisy, manipulation, backbiting. After seeing headlines of yet another tragic case of abuse, after anguishing over yet another congregant whitewashing bigotry and racism in pious platitudes, after suffering a betrayal by a core church member whose wedding I'd performed, whose children I'd baptized, whose crises I'd showed up for on a moment's notice—well, after a couple of decades of all that, I've wondered whether the institution I serve hasn't lost the plot of the One whose Name we bear.

I've walked with enough suffering people that I've had to wonder, given how cruel life can be, and how seemingly random our hardships are, whether there's really a God worth believing in behind it all. I know what it's like to pray your heart out for someone and for those prayers to seemingly go nowhere. These questions aren't just ones I've fielded—they're ones I've lived.

That said, this book is an extended conversation about why, even given our own whispering doubts and the wreckage of church-inflicted pain we live with, I still think it's a good, true, beautiful thing to be a follower of Jesus. This conviction doesn't reside in me *despite* all the wonderings and struggles articulated here—it's there, and there more deeply, *because of* the honest, even painful, process of engaging them. So I'd love to converse with you in these pages about the Christian story, explore the doubts and struggles we have with it, and see if there isn't a way forward through the ambivalent spiritual territory many of us know all too well.

BLACK & BREW

In our first years in Philadelphia, my family lived in a two-bedroom, five-hundred-square-foot Trinity-style brick row house tucked into a narrow side street in East Passyunk. Our dog, Baxter, and our toddler, Brennan, occupied one bedroom, which left Monica and me, our newborn son, Kuyper, and our church's "office"—my laptop, a home printer, and a few boxes of documents—to share the other room. Space was scarce to go over my sermon notes, so I'd begin many of my Sundays at a neighborhood café. In the stillness of Sunday's early hours, I'd slide out of bed and attempt to tiptoe my way down our creaking stairs and across our old oak floors without waking either of our kids. After escaping through the front door, I'd walk the tangle of narrow South Philly streets east and south to Black & Brew, which sat just a block up the street from the neighborhood square on Passyunk Avenue.

I'd enter as they'd open for the day at 6 a.m. and spread my notes, Bible, huevos rancheros, and Americano with cream across my usual table in the back of the café beneath the bay window. Most of those Sunday mornings, there were just three of us in Black & Brew as the sun rose and streamed across the dense, sleepy neighborhood: the woman working the early shift, barista and chef for the few customers who might wander in at that hour; me, nose buried in Bible, books, notes—and Daniel.

Daniel would usually sit at the bar, perched attentively over a plate of eggs Benedict and a cup of hot black coffee, scruffy beard tracing a slender jawline that just barely escaped the shadow of his herringbone flatcap. He was finishing his

Saturday night as I was starting my Sunday morning. On Saturday nights, Daniel would club his way up and down Thirteenth Street and the surrounding area, migrating from ICandy to L'Etage or Dirty Franks or the U Bar or sometimes a house party for drinks. When Saturday night was fully spent, he'd make a last stop at Black & Brew for some eggs before stumbling up his apartment steps next door to sleep through the morning hours.

The first few Sundays that Daniel and I spent occupying neighboring tables, we each kept our faces buried in breakfast and what was in front of us—sermon notes in my case, and whatever copy of the *New Yorker*, *Long Live Vinyl*, or *VICE* magazine that Black & Brew had left out for customers to peruse in his. But one Sunday, I had a vague sense of his gaze wandering again and again to settle on my turned back, Bible, and shuffle of papers. After finishing his breakfast, he deposited his cup and plate in the dish bin near the door, opened it to step out into the chilly morning air, and turned to me as he left, inquiring, "Is that, like, a Bible or something?"

I told him it was, introduced myself, and asked his name.

"Daniel." Then, after a short silence: "Are you some kind of priest or pastor?"

I nodded, admitted I was, and divulged that I was looking over my notes for our worship service that day.

"Wow. Really?! . . . Well, see you next Sunday, I guess, Father."

He breezed out the door. I listened to the thump of Daniel's ascent up the steps on the other side of the wall to his second-floor apartment to end his Saturday night. I felt sure I had scared him off—that next weekend he'd surely find somewhere

else to enjoy his eggs and coffee in peace, somewhere that wouldn't put him in such dangerous proximity to a Christian minister.

But I was wrong. When I walked into Black & Brew the next Sunday morning, there he was: same seat at the bar, same eggs Benedict, hollandaise spilling over the side of the plate, same flatcap. We exchanged a knowing nod as I sat down, placed my order, and arranged the contents of my bag at my usual table. To my surprise, after a few minutes, I saw a shadow across my right shoulder and turned to discover Daniel standing at the edge of the table. "So what are you talking about this Sunday, Father?"

I don't remember the text I was preaching on or the topic of the sermon for that Sunday, but I do remember staring at Daniel, then staring down at my notes, then staring back at him again and having not the slightest idea what to say. I fumbled around and eventually got there, attempting to relate whatever selection from Exodus or Isaiah or John we would attend to that day. We talked for a few moments, and then Daniel left as usual, thump-thumping up the stairs next door.

This bit of sermon discussion happened this way, at that back table, most Sundays over the next few years: several sips of an Americano, a few bites of breakfast, and then, "Hey, Father, what are you talking about today?" It was the best preaching class in which I've ever enrolled. I'd taken courses to learn the Scriptures, courses to enable me to preach and teach them in the context of a church community, and courses to sharpen and hone my communication skills. But I had zero idea how to translate the gospel proclamations of these ancient texts for someone like Daniel—someone who knew almost nothing of

the Christian story, whose cultural vocabulary didn't include the insider speak of my faith, and whose life and family experiences only sporadically included entering a church building. Those conversations with Daniel forced me to wrestle with questions I had never seriously considered about Jesus, the Bible, and God; they compelled me to relearn the language of faith in a way that would be meaningful and jargon-free for someone like Daniel; and they ultimately helped me find my voice in conversing about life, death, and the Father, Son, and Spirit to my many friends like Daniel who live their lives outside the decaying ruins of Christendom. Week by week, to this day, as I sit in my study with piles of books, that same Bible perched on a lectern, and scribbles of notes and ideas, prepping for the weekly work of preaching and teaching, I picture Daniel easing into the chair across from me to ask that same question: "What are you talking about today, Father?"

Think of what follows here as an extension of those conversations Daniel and I had Sunday by Sunday as we sat in Black & Brew. I'd love to include you in them. And I hope you'll pull up a chair and bring with you your questions and puzzles about faith, your cynicism and pain, and your flickering inklings of desire or hope or joy.

CHAPTER ONE

HEIMA

Our Longing for Home

Great are you, O Lord, and surpassingly worthy of praise. . . . You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

AUGUSTINE, *The Confessions*

Formed in the 1990s, by 2006 the Icelandic band Sigur Rós had achieved international critical acclaim and widespread commercial success. After finishing one of their world tours, they returned to Iceland to play a series of free, unannounced concerts in far-flung towns throughout their native country, which they filmed and released together as a documentary. In a deserted fishing town, a protest camp adjacent to a controversial dam, and an isolated highland wilderness, Sigur Rós performed their unique brand of elegant, symphonic post-rock. The soaring transcendence of their music matched the stark, rugged landscape of Iceland, which served as the backdrop for the film. Bassist and multi-instrumentalist Georg Hólm described

the genesis of the project in an interview, saying, "I sometimes get this strange and sort of uncontrollable urge to want to go home."[1] The title of the film? *Heima*, which is Icelandic for both "at home" and "homeland."

HOMELAND

This ache for a homeland—for a heima from which we are dislocated in some way—is territory we all come to know sooner or later. It resides silently beneath all our successes and achievements, sneaks up on us in our quiet, wondering moments, convulses us in our lives' catastrophes.

As we'll come to see, the Christian story claims that this longing is woven into the very fabric of what it means to be human.[2] The author Frederick Buechner observes,

> No matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons to us. It is part of what the book of Genesis means by saying that we are made in the image of God.[3]

This inescapable yearning for our "true home," as Buechner describes it, comes to gnaw at us all in different ways.

HOMESICK

For some, it surfaces as a nagging thirst for spiritual experience, a craving to connect to a Reality beyond what we can see, measure, or observe. This appetite stubbornly persists, even among

the deeply secular. A feature piece in the *Atlantic* a few years ago chronicles this phenomenon; it acknowledges the widespread decline of participation in religious institutions among people in North America and Europe and the dramatic rise of self-identified "nones"—people who claim no association to any religious body. But the author, whose article is titled "Atheists Are Sometimes More Religious than Christians," notes how spiritual practices endure even among the growing numbers of the un- and disaffiliated. She chronicles the phenomenon of "atheist churches"; the "Beyoncé Mass" that a San Francisco cathedral held in 2018; and the Catholic-themed Met Gala of the same year, featuring A-list celebrities parading the red carpet in papal tiaras, halos, angel wings, and crucifixes.[4]

Maybe you've never ventured into an "atheist church" or attended a worship service featuring the musical catalog of Queen Bey or worn a papal tiara to a party. But in my experience, this inner ache sneaks up on even the most skeptical among us. It might, for you, have materialized that time when you were hiking the Portuguese coast and found yourself swept up in the violent beauty of the surf cascading relentlessly down on the rocky shoreline. Or when you sat with a cup of hot black coffee in a canoe on an Adirondack lake in the pregnant stillness just before dawn. Or when you wandered the worn, dense tangle of stone streets in an ancient city you'd never visited before. In these moments, you catch yourself thinking that all this staggering, burgeoning beauty can't—just can't—have issued from some meaningless cosmic accident.

Or maybe the ache slid in late one night as you sat at a long table. It was the third or fourth hour of the dinner you put together for some people from disparate dimensions of your

life. The whole night had a choreography you didn't even really intend: the way old and new friends mixed and mingled over oysters, cheese, and antipasto; the way the tastes and textures of the branzino you'd roasted over charcoal, the vegetables from the neighborhood market, and the bottles of Verdejo you'd picked up all accompanied one another; the unhurried meander of conversation, laughter, stories. It was late, and dark, and the lights had all long since gone out in your neighbors' windows. But in the opaque nighttime, as you looked around the table, everything was good, and whole, and connected. And you wondered if there was something somehow hallowed about this table, this food, this gathering of people—as if this meal might be a taste of some greater Feast.

Or maybe it's in music that you make out the echo of Home. The War on Drugs are playing "Thinking of a Place," and something about the shimmering, lilting layers of guitars and the yearning in Adam Granduciel's weather-beaten voice breaks something open in you. Or you actually turn off your phone and laptop so that you can attend in an undivided way to the pop and hiss of Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* on vinyl. And for just a minute or two, it seems like the music is connecting you with a More that you don't know how to describe exactly except that you know that the music said it, or perhaps it came through the music, in a way you can't quite express.

For some, the yearning for a homeland to which we haven't arrived materializes as a restlessness, a wandering dissatisfaction. You find yourself wondering if you would feel more settled, more content, if you lived in a different city. If you'd rest easy in life if you could just make partner, or land a gig at that rival

start-up, or start your own organization. If you might come to be more, well, *at home* if your house were just a bit bigger, or if you lived in a different neighborhood, or if you were sending your kids to more highly rated schools.

Maybe you think you'd finally be satisfied with yourself if you could find a spouse.

Or if your spouse were only different from the way they are.

Or if you could have kids.

Or if your kids were different from the way they are.

This wanderlust for an unencumbered future and an open road was immortalized more than half a century ago in Jack Kerouac's iconic novel *On the Road*. This semiautobiographical book—a restless, freewheeling tale of hitchhiking and road trips, jazz, sexual misadventures, and drugs—became the defining work of the counterculture movement. It has since shaped decades of music, film, literature, and culture. It's become the hallmark picture of what it means to belong to the Beat Generation. And yet, fascinatingly, Kerouac's writing was originally inspired by John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a classic depiction of spiritual pilgrimage in which Christian, Bunyan's protagonist, goes searching for "an inheritance, incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away."[5] In fact, Kerouac, in defining what it meant to be "Beat," drew together the expression of exhaustion—"I'm beat!"—and the vision of the beatific—the "visio beatifica," or "vision of God."[6] In Christian theology, this phrase depicts the blissful, unhindered vision of God's glory that is the ultimate destiny of God's rescued people. Our wanderlust, the allure of the open road, of the new city: If we can see it, these are all signposts pointing toward Home.

IS EVERYTHING PERMITTED?

For others, this yearning begins to take shape as we puzzle over the passions that drive us and how they cohere (or don't) within the story of the world we inhabit. I'll never forget sitting with my friend Aaron several years ago as he wrestled with this. He had recently begun attending my church's worship services, and over a pint around the corner table at our neighborhood pub, he told me a bit of his story. Aaron was a young doctor from a wealthy family, and he had gone into medicine because he had a passion to provide healing to people in need. Rather than aim for a lucrative future in private practice in a wealthy suburb, as most of his peers from medical school had, Aaron had accepted an assignment in an under-resourced hospital in an impoverished and dangerous urban neighborhood.

"I've had this deep desire to help people for as long as I can remember," he told me. "But I'm also an atheist, so my beliefs tell me it doesn't matter if I live a life that helps other people or just myself. Living unselfishly doesn't matter in any ultimate way if life doesn't have any purpose."

While his gaze drifted out the window, after a silent minute, Aaron added, "I don't know what to do with that."

Neither do many of us. And neither did Albert Camus. Camus was a twentieth-century French existentialist philosopher and author. He came to believe that life was characterized by "the absurd": that absent religious beliefs to prop up our sense of meaning and significance, life is incomprehensible and meaningless. For Camus, inevitable death undermined the value of anything that preceded it in life. Paradoxically, he lived with a deep "moral fervour and intellectual intensity."[7] Camus

called this his "revolt."[8] He insisted that the best way to respond to the supposed meaninglessness of existence is to treat it with the contempt of acting as if every aspect of human life really does matter in a final sense.

He wrote this quandary right into one of his signature novels, *The Plague*. In the early, solitary days of the COVID-19 quarantine, I picked up a copy of Camus's quintessential existentialist novel as we were in the first months of learning to weather our own plague. It's set in the French-Algerian city of Oran and follows Dr. Bernard Rieux as he responds to a growing plague in his city. At the beginning of the book, rats start vacating sewers and cellars and dying in the streets. Then a few people fall violently ill and die. Then the number of cases keeps multiplying. As disease sweeps through the city, Rieux comes to befriend Jean Tarrou, a noble character who happened to be in Oran at the plague's outbreak and who works with Rieux to organize teams of volunteers to combat the spread of disease.

In a moving moment, Rieux and Tarrou sit together on a roof one evening, after an exhausting day tending to the ailing. As they look out over the terraced rooftops of Oran's skyline and out to the sea beyond, Tarrou tells his story to Rieux, including how he'd come to care deeply about taking "the path of sympathy" toward others in life. And then, as the two talk, Tarrou continues:

> "It comes to this," Tarrou said almost casually, "what interests me is learning how to become a saint."
>
> "But you don't believe in God."
>
> "Exactly! Can one be a saint without God?—that's the problem, in fact the only problem, I'm up against today."[9]

Tarrou, tragically, becomes one of the last victims of the plague in Oran. Camus depicts Tarrou's death (in congruence with his life) heroically, befitting of an atheist who has become a saint. Tarrou's puzzle is the same one Aaron was wrestling with as he sat across the pub table from me. It's not that Christians, or adherents of other religions, are more moral than others. And it's not that secular people don't care about universal human rights or educational inequality or providing the world's poor with basic medical aid.

On the contrary, the world is filled with many, many people devoted to healing bodies and minds, to providing food and clean water to impoverished communities that lack access to them, to emancipating trafficked boys and girls, and more. This is the dilemma: Why? Someone who believes that life is absurd and meaningless and yet pursues "the path of sympathy" toward others—who gives their money generously or teaches underprivileged children or provides medical care to a Majority World village—chooses to live in a way at odds with their own beliefs about life.

Fyodor Dostoevsky sums up the related predicament of our mutual moral obligations in his *The Brothers Karamazov*. In a moment in which Dmitri Karamazov is in an argument with his brother Alyosha, he points out to his brother, "Without God and the future life? It means everything is permitted now, one can do anything. Didn't you know?"[10] Without God, you may choose to care that the poor have access to medical help or you may choose to believe that trafficking humans is evil or that ethnic cleansing is deplorable. But in the last analysis, you can't believe that all people must also believe those same things. Everything is permitted.

DANTE

Maybe this ache for heima hasn't been as abstract as all that for you. Perhaps it arrives in a more personal, visceral way. It could be that it collides with you at some juncture in life in which your whole existence seems like it's on some pointless, unwanted detour, and you're just lost. Your career has fallen apart, and you have no idea what you're going to do with yourself. The phone rings one afternoon with the test results that shatter your whole world. The person who said "I do" to you one day decides that they don't anymore, and now you're alone again.

In the summer of 2019, I took a sabbatical from pastoral work, and our family spent some time in Italy. I was exhausted: The prior couple of years had been wracked with crises, budgetary troubles, conflict. We were going to be in Florence for a bit, and I figured there couldn't be a better place to try reading Dante's famous *Divine Comedy* than in his hometown, so I stuffed a copy in my backpack before we left. The train we rode throttled down the track along the coast, from Cinque Terre south and east toward Florence. As the passenger seated next to me nodded off, I opened *The Divine Comedy* and read,

> *When I had journeyed half of our life's way,*
> *I found myself within a shadowed forest,*
> *for I had lost the path that does not stray.*
> *Ah, it is hard to speak of what it was,*
> *that savage forest, dense and difficult,*
> *which even in recall renews my fear:*
> *so bitter—death is hardly more severe!*[11]

Those famous first lines of Dante's masterpiece were a mirror to me. Something in that moment crumbled inside me, and the pages were soon stained wet with the hot tears that just wouldn't stop coming. My life had become bitter, dense, difficult. I'd lost the path. I needed to get Home.

INCONSOLABLE SECRET

C. S. Lewis was a literature professor at Oxford University through the middle of the twentieth century. He lived much of his life as an atheist until, to his own surprise, he found himself convinced of the veracity and beauty of the Christian faith. In an important essay he wrote several years after his conversion, entitled "The Weight of Glory," he explores these incessant, unfulfilled desires for our homeland, which he calls "our own far-off country." These longings, which lie below the waterline of every human life, Lewis calls our "inconsolable secret":

> In speaking of this desire for our own far-off country, which we find in ourselves even now, I feel a certain shyness. I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you—the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence; the secret also which pierces with such sweetness that when, in very intimate conversation, the mention of it becomes imminent, we grow awkward and affect to laugh at ourselves; the secret we cannot hide and cannot tell, though we desire to do both. We cannot tell it because

> it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our experience. We cannot hide it because our experience is constantly suggesting it, and we betray ourselves like lovers at the mention of a name. Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter. . . . But all this is a cheat.[12]

We have, each of us, Lewis observes, a deep well of unfulfilled desire, which we experience as a longing for love, a sense of transcendence, a passion for justice, the exquisite beauty of food or music or wine or sex. But Lewis goes on to notice something else as well: Our deep longings are a well with no bottom, a thirst that's never really quenched.

> The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. . . . For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.[13]

In other words, our restlessness, our occasional brushes with transcendence, our vague awareness of spiritual reality, the lostness that we all sooner or later know—all these are signs pointing toward the Home from which we find ourselves displaced. In the words of Lewis's friend and contemporary J. R. R. Tolkien, what we yearn for is "a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."[14]

EXILE

The Scriptures have a name for this state of affairs: exile.

Six or so centuries before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish people experienced a devastation that forever defined their story. The Babylonian army, in 587 BC or so, besieged and destroyed the city of Jerusalem, then carted off thousands of the surviving Jewish people across hundreds of miles of Middle Eastern desert to a subservient existence in the city of Babylon. The Jewish people in Babylon were far from home, disconnected from everything familiar about their lives. Their city and Temple had been burned, their communities decimated. No home, no future, no hope: They were in exile.

It was, however, in this experience of exile that they edited and gathered into final form the Hebrew Scriptures as we now know them. They told their own story to answer the fundamental human questions we all share: *Who are we?*, *Where are we from?*, and *How did we get here?* And, as they did, they didn't just tell their own story—they told all our stories. They narrated the reality that exile isn't simply the Jewish predicament—it's the human predicament.

In the chapters that begin the Scriptures, humans are created in the image of the living God. They're at home in a creation teeming with goodness, beauty, and harmony (the word *Eden*, the name for the garden home of the first humans, literally means "delight"). The human community is connected to their Creator. They are in harmony with themselves and with one another. The biblical narrator tells us that the primal man and woman "were both naked, and were not ashamed"[15]—in other words, they were both fully vulnerable, fully themselves, and

also comprehensively embraced by the other. And the humans were placed in a creation brimming with possibility, called by their Creator to work, create, and develop this good world in which they found themselves.

The far-off country we're made for, our Edenic home, is characterized by what later Hebrew prophets would call shalom. We translate that word into English as "peace," but this is a rather thin and flimsy representation of the fullness the biblical writers depicted. In the words of theologian Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *shalom*, in Scripture, connotes the

> webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight. . . . Shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, all under the arch of God's love. Shalom, in other words, is the way things are supposed to be.[16]

This is, of course, not the world we know. The primeval drama of Genesis 3 depicts humanity turning our backs on our Creator, and in so doing, shalom is violated. Our arrogance ruptures our bonds with God, alienates us from each other, pollutes our relationship to ourselves and to the material world around us. This picture of the wreckage of a world gone wrong is both puzzling and profound.

Look a little closer, for example, at the picture of the human predicament. As God warns the primal people of the effects of taking from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he says soberly, "In the day that you eat of it you shall die."[17] But as the

narrative unfolds, the humans' rebellion isn't met with death (at least in the way we'd at first assume). Our insurgence issues in banishment. The biblical narrator tells us that "the LORD God sent [the humans] forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which [they were] taken. He drove out the [humans]."[18] Tellingly, across the tapestry of the Hebrew Scriptures, the words used here for God "sending forth" and "driving out" (*shalach* and *garash*, respectively) the man and woman from their Edenic home are used elsewhere to describe the experience of exile.[19] In other words, our banishment from our true Home, our exile from the One we're made for, is the death we all die, every day of our lives, in a world east of Eden.

The first word of God to a vandalized world, and to God's own rebellious children, is not some enraged outburst. God calls into the evening dark like a parent tenderly coaxing a shame-ridden toddler out from hiding under her bed: "Where are you?"

Then there's the response of the Creator. After they've tasted the forbidden fruit, the man and woman realize they're naked and seek to cover their shame and evade their Maker among the trees of the Garden. This is, obviously, an absurd picture: Shrubbery can't hide humanity from deity. But the biblical narrator tells us that "the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'"[20] The first word of God to a vandalized world, and to God's own rebellious children, is not some enraged outburst. God calls into the evening dark like a parent tenderly coaxing a shame-ridden toddler out from hiding under her bed: "Where are you?"

This is God's principal pronouncement to a cosmos gone wrong.

Where are you?

This is the question that echoes around the cosmos.

Where are you?

This is what God keeps asking, as God, in stubborn love, pursues the fickle family of humanity throughout the sprawling drama of the Scriptures.

Where are you?

If you listen hard enough, it's there beneath your longings and your losses, below your brushes with transcendence and glory, between the ordinariness of your everyday and the occasional catastrophes in your story. It resides behind your frantic search for love and acceptance. After it all:

Where are you?

In the exiles of each of our lives, this is the question God is still whispering:

Where are you?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the main questions or struggles you've had with believing in God, Christianity, or the church?
2. How have you experienced the longing for Home in your own life?
3. Have you ever sensed God asking *Where are you?* in your life? How do you respond to his voice?