

## Part I: Denying Jesus

Though I am not yet 30, I have no shortage of regrets. One that comes to mind is something I said in a coffee shop in 2014. I had just flown out to California with my mom and was just a few days from starting my first year of college. I had been accepted to a film school in Orange County and felt determined to make movies. At that moment, I believed that is what I was put on earth to do. My mom stopped at a bakery to get some coffee and breakfast and a sociology student was conducting a public survey. She approached us and asked, "What is most important to you?" Mom, very wisely, said that her relationship with God is most important. In front of my mother, I said that nothing was more important to me than my writing. I wince at this memory because, at the time, it was true. I would have left my family and my faith if it meant getting to make movies and, in some ways, I did.

In college, I often spent time with a comedy group. A rare late night opportunity presented itself when a friend of mine asked the small group what we thought happens when we die. A wise and dear friend of mine shared his faith and his hope in Jesus. I admired his boldness while smoking my cigarette and saying nothing, wishing I had something to say.

Another instance I regret occurred years later on the night shift at a busy call center. A friend and coworker of mine asked me in a rare moment of vulnerability, "How do you stay so happy? What keeps you going?" The words of Peter flashed in my mind: "Always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that you have." I replied that I often remembered that the sun will eventually explode and everything on Earth will die. Thus, my daily problems, in the grand scheme of things, don't really matter. I won't soon forget her look of disappointment.

The first time I was asked to give my testimony was for a school assignment. I was homeschooled and attended a Christian co-op and we were assigned to share our faith with a friend. In my paper, I explained how I felt as if I had no good news to share because I doubted I was even saved at all. When asked again during church this month, I remembered this moment and realized that I now had something to say which is a fairly recent development.

Time after time, like Saint Peter on Good Friday, I have denied any affiliation with God when directly asked. I've described myself as an agnostic, a believer in but not a follower of Jesus, and even someone preordained by God for damnation. However, it didn't start out that way. Once, long ago, I believed in God with all my heart.

## Part II: Charismatic at Heart

From a young age, God surrounded me with wise and decent people who loved Him. I grew up in a paradisiacal childhood with two parents who loved and encouraged me no matter what and a younger brother with the love of God in his heart. I never lacked any material needs and, often unwittingly, I never lacked spiritual nourishment either. My parents, my grandparents, my brother, my aunts and uncles, my church, and many of our family friends all demonstrated

wisdom and kindness that ushered me into the Kingdom of God. I learned the Bible stories, memorized scripture, and knew the love of God firsthand. I grew up in the Pentecostal tradition so I believed in a very active (if sometimes wild and crazy) God which seeped into every corner of life. I believed in the power of intercessory prayer and in God's special favor for his Saints. When I was about 8 years old, I even witnessed what can only be described as a miracle in my own body.

At the time, I suffered from eczema to the extent that every finger was split apart, bleeding and always wrapped in bandages. During an emotional summer night in a hot tent at kids camp, I experienced what some called being "slain in the spirit," falling to the floor in a trance state. I saw nothing and heard those praying over me in strange tongues. When I got up, my hands were completely numb. Chills ran down my spine as I took off the bandages to find perfect, undamaged skin. From that point forward and to this day, I discounted people who believe that the physical world is all that exists as people with an incomplete picture of reality. I knew there was more to reality than that which could be either measured or repeatedly observed and I never doubted that God existed after that day. That's easy enough—but what in the world do we make of Him? As I grew into adolescence, that proved to be the hard part.

I read my Bible and studied it diligently but certain doctrines of my church rubbed me the wrong way. Why do we constantly jabber in tongues when Paul tells us not to do so without an interpreter? Why are we so convinced that God has a wife planned for every young Christian man? Are we sure that we need to verbally repent of every sin immediately after we do it lest we die suddenly and go straight to Hell due to our unforgiven sin? Did Pastor Mark really die because we didn't pray with enough faith? Why do we believe that Adam and Eve coexisting with dinosaurs is a fundamental pillar of Christianity? I had long, heated discussions with youth pastors about how their teachings were wrong and discordant with the Bible. Meanwhile, in the background, I felt the looming presence of dark forces which were more difficult to counter than shaky doctrine.

My Grandma prayed constantly. She would pray over everything and would constantly worship God in song and recite scripture. When she felt threatened by evil though, she would speak to Satan, his legions, sickness, death, and Hell itself directly. I sometimes did the same, touting the authority vested in me by Jesus to conquer the Satanic realm. But as I grew older, my anti-Satanic gusto felt like an empty threat. I felt as if I had lost my legitimacy because of my doubt and ever deepening pool of sin. I felt harassed, tormented, depressed, and like I was the worst person God had ever made. In this thick cloud of doubt and self-loathing, I enrolled at a highschool co-op which my parents gravely warned me was run by Calvinists.

### Part III: A Reformed Mind

After discovering it as a 15 year old, Calvinism felt like an antidote to my theological illness. It righted every gripe I had with my Pentecostal roots and had this stodgy respectability that fascinated me. I read R. C. Sproul, Tim Keller, and Wayne Grudem alongside the Western canon. I learned about the Five Solas, the doctrine of total depravity, divine sovereignty, and

predestination for the first time. After 16 long years of darkness, I had finally figured everything out! The title of my high school senior thesis was called "The Pragmatic God: Utilitarianism and the Bible." It argued that, from a human standpoint, doing bad things because "the ends justify the means" is not acceptable because we don't actually know the ends with any certainty. However, God, being outside of time and space, can do things that appear evil to us because He knows that they will "work together for the good of those who love him and are called according to His purpose." I could finally explain my Christianity to others in a way that sounded rational and complete. When my parents would object, I would arrogantly challenge them to debate me and explain away the whole of scripture which so obviously reflected the exact ideations of John Calvin. It was something I truly could believe in. Unfortunately, one other doctrine that came with this worldview is that, in a very real way, God hated most people and loved very few of them.

This was abhorrent to me the first time I heard it but, hearing both sides of the argument, I found it to be the most logical conclusion and comforted myself with the story of Job in which God tells a pleading, suffering man to mind his own business because God is God and man is man. This cold, distant, pragmatic God was my God for several years. But the trouble with this kind of God is that He is actually very hard to love. I feared Him, respected Him, and never questioned why he pummeled island nations with hurricanes or suffocated children in Congolese cobalt mines but I honestly figured it was for the best. But deep down, I also dreaded the day when Christ came back. What if God did not make me a sheep bound for the pastures of heaven? What if I was a goat made for the fires of Hell? This did trouble me but, "Oh well," I thought. "Must be for the best, either way."

This line of thinking can be comforting for a secure person but, when faced with adversity, I found that others weren't very excited about it. In times of trouble, no one wanted to hear my Gospel message which at the time consisted of me explaining Pascal's wager and not how Jesus had saved my life. "You should be a Christian because it makes sense. Like it or not, it's the truth. Take it or leave it but do so at your own peril." I became friends with a gay man who grew up in a Christian church and he said he would like to know more about my faith. I explained original sin, total depravity, and Romans but I rarely mentioned myself. At the time, what "Jesus had done for me" seemed irrelevant. Needless to say, he was not won over. Truth be told, when the going got tough, I was not won over either.

#### Part IV: My Christian Purpose

Historically speaking, Christianity is most alive and well among those who have little reason to hope in the securities of this world. In the early church, it was regarded as the religion of "women and slaves" as the message of Jesus seems most potent in those with very little power. Furthermore, the Church thrives in adversity. The church father Tertullian famously said that "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Turmoil and suffering has a long history of making people stronger in Christ and I've found this to be personally true as well. It is easy to say that God is the orchestrator of every evil on earth in an abstract way but it's much harder to

dismiss the problem of evil with a hand wave when you're drowning in it yourself. Things fell apart when, for the first time in my life, I encountered some true struggles.

As with many, the going got tougher in 2020. I watched a known virus kill people I care about, throw the world into turmoil, pit families against each other, and make many people very lonely. I also watched an unknown virus infect countless people with hatred of others on the account of politics. This sharp departure from what I considered to be predictable Christian behavior left me with many questions. How could the people of God stand behind such virulent hatred and violence? I became disenfranchised with my politics, my country, and the world at large. As it turns out, I did *not* know everything after all and my research seemed to indicate that no one else did either. I stumbled upon the word of doubting “ex-vangelicals” who wrote lengthy articles and made scathing videos of the Bible’s historical, philosophical, and narrative validity. I hadn’t forgotten my hands being healed and knew that God existed but I no longer believed He was knowable. The book He left and the world He made were too confusing for me. However, soon I wouldn’t have the luxury to sit around and ponder which doctrine was right and which doctrine was not.

In late 2019, my childhood friend was sentenced to life in prison with no possibility of parole. In 2020, all normalcy fell apart. In August 2021, my best friend's mother unexpectedly died, my model parents shocked everyone with an unexpected divorce, a close family member faced a severe crisis of mental health, and another dear friend of mine nearly died. It seemed that all of my loved ones were simultaneously facing the darkest moments of their lives. When under duress, people have a tendency to turn to God. Some even turned to me for religious guidance which, at the time, I certainly did not feel qualified to give. After years of darkness and spiritual navel gazing, real problems were finally put at my feet and it did take long to recognize that they were too big for me.

One of the most impactful pieces of literature I’ve read is a chapter called “Let’s Pretend” in C. S. Lewis’ indispensable book *Mere Christianity*. Since my adolescence, I didn’t feel like a Christian. I may have said that I loved God but I hadn't felt any affection towards Him since I was little. I thought this was a sign that I was predestined for Hell as, despite all of my efforts, I could not make my faith strong enough to save me. But Lewis, in all of his vast wisdom, suggested that I should act or “pretend” like I was someone who *did* love God. I should do good works and go through the motions of Christianity, even if I did not believe it, and that someday I may be surprised to find that I really did.

So I pretended. I forgave people when I didn’t feel like it. I gave money away that I would rather keep. I welcomed other people’s pain and sorrow, not providing a theological explanation for it like I did in the past but doing my best to help carry the weight. For a while, I pretended to believe in the goodness and love of God, I pretended to love God’s word, and pretended to enjoy serving in church. After a while, I noticed some puzzling changes. Somehow, at no single point in particular pretending felt less disingenuous than it used to. I remember singing Christmas carols at the end of 2022 and was amazed to find myself crying and actually believing in what I sang. The pretending only got easier with time.

Finding the old reformed resources not as helpful as they once were, I ventured into other rooms of God's house. I was greatly influenced by C. S. Lewis, N. T. Wright, and surprisingly Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky who all taught me that there was more to life than the intellectualizing God. I could find God not just in books but in the midst of the suffering of other people. The best spiritual discipline was acting as if I believed in God and wanted to please Him, even if I didn't. Finding the Russian Orthodox and Anglicans so transformative, I read up on and visited my brothers and sisters in the Catholic tradition and was shocked by how richly they blessed me. I was struck with how liturgy, sacraments (especially Confession), and good works were not, as I always suspected, the means of salvation. Rather, they were the instruments of strengthening my wobbling faith. If faith is the muscle, good works are the weights.

The farther I prodded the borders of Christianity, the more I came to understand the sheer scope of the Body of Christ. The denominations I once swore allegiance to did not represent the whole gospel—they were mere cuticles on the ancient and beautiful Body of Christ, each one bearing its purpose in a particular place and time. I definitely didn't know everything. In fact, I began to feel as if I knew nothing for certain and, for the first time, my lack of all the answers didn't bother me. In retrospect, even the doctrines I now no longer hold were instrumental in my development. If not for the Pentecostal church of my childhood, I would likely doubt miracles, spiritually, and God himself entirely. If not for the Reformed period, I would never have studied Greek or nearly as much of the Bible or Church history as I have. If not for my days of living like an atheist, I would now have a much narrower view of the world itself and would lack empathy for those who are lost. If not for my exploratory period of other Christian traditions across history and the globe, I believe I would be spiritually impoverished. Each step of the way, God was preparing me for a life in which someone like me could believe in someone like Jesus.

## Part V: Accepting Christ

I have always struggled with proselytizing. Who am I to speak on behalf of God and to explain what I don't understand? My testimony is neither dramatic nor straightforward. I have never had a great, singular obstacle in my life which was washed away overnight by the Gospel. What I do have, however, is a purpose to my life and I believe that is something worth sharing. Corrie Ten Boom once said, "If you look at yourself, you'll be depressed. If you look at the world, you'll be distressed. But if you look to God, you'll be at rest." Having been depressed, distressed, and at rest, I've also found it to be true. I've scoured the world many times over for that which is not God. I've looked to love, politics, science, art, mysticism, philosophy, and even the Occult but all have left me empty. I'm convinced that there is nothing of this world which can anchor a person's soul and give them purpose which will not inevitably let them down. As Lewis says, "If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world." While there may be no hope in this world, Jesus has given a source of hope from outside of it. Jesus himself said, "On this rock, I have built my Church; and the Gates of Hell shall not prevail against." This I think indicates that the Gospel should not be a shelter against suffering but a battering ram against the innumerable Satanic strongholds of this world. I believe we are meant to go on the offensive against the

forces of Hell which manifest themselves in very real and natural ways: physical and mental sickness, loneliness, poverty, hopelessness, and despair. While the world promises us nothing but pain, Jesus provides us with a message that says alleviating the pain of others whenever possible makes life not only worth living but also enjoyable.

I now speak, parent, love, play, and work with a purpose in life which is not dependent on my complete understanding of God, mankind, or anything else. My life's purpose is to be a light in a very dark world whenever the opportunity presents itself. I don't think very much about my salvation or systematic theology anymore but I try to be more conscious of other people than I used to be. While I was once a misanthrope who "hated people," after all my pretending I now feel compelled to do no harm to anyone and to love everyone I meet. My goal in life is to give others a glimmer of the Kingdom of God as it was revealed to me: a place where everyone matters and where it is not insane to hold hope and joy in your heart in all circumstances.

I aim to both acknowledge that I live in Hell while acting as if I lived in Heaven. As a human being in general and especially as Jesse Cupp, I often fail at this aspiration. Too often, I am lazy and selfish and sometimes extremely angry. I lack self control and waste so much time. I deny myself very little and still regularly feel like a pretender. Nevertheless, I'll keep pretending until I reach the grave and hope that, along the way, many will be blessed or at least reminded that there is something beyond the suffering and emptiness of this world. When I'm worn down by the enemy, I will still pretend because I believe in a God who loves us. I believe in Jesus Christ, His son, who died for me when I was not worth dying for so I might become someone who *is* worth dying for. There are many aspects of the Bible that I do not understand but I believe that Jesus really was crucified, dead, and buried before he rose again and ministered to his disciples. I believe that He lives today and that his Spirit guides and fills his universal, global, varied, and invisible Church which is the primary instrument of God's grace on earth.

I look back on my past public denials of Christ with regret but also with longing for a second chance because I know it would be different now. I believe that God has entrusted me with the light of His Spirit and I no longer wish to hide it. For any current or former Christians reading this, go read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and live like you take it seriously, even if you don't feel like it. After a while, you might find that you do. For anyone who is not a Christian reading this, know that within you lies a well of love you do not understand and before you lies a peace you cannot imagine. I can assure you that God loves you, that I love you, and that a practicable, everyday embodiment of a belief in Jesus can turn a miserable person into a happy one and alter the reality of everyone around you. Know that you, whoever you are, *do* matter and that Jesus intimately knows and shares in your suffering. If you want to know Him better, entrust your suffering to Him so that you have the power to lift others up out of theirs. If you are not ready now, then remember the promise of God when the world inevitably proves to be a disappointment. Jesus will never turn you away. In less esoteric terms, I would recommend meeting with a pastor if you are interested in turning this longing into a reality as the Christian life was not meant to be lived alone. Furthermore, I'd be remiss if I didn't extend the offer myself. My number is 513-488-9428. Call me about anything, anywhere and anytime. If I don't answer,

leave a message and I will call you back. Helping those in need is why I exist. Even when I don't feel like ministering, I believe I am called to at least pretend that I do.