

EXCERPT



Land of My Sojourn
The Landscape of a Faith Lost and Found

February 27, 2024 | \$24, 176 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4734-1

Since leaving local church ministry, Mike Cospers spent time examining the church's often troubled witness, its ongoing crisis of leadership, and the epidemic of narcissism, abuse, and cover-up that has continued to emerge. This book shares his journey—the shattering of dreams and the grace that restored a broken faith in the aftermath.

Rediscover the Belief That Jesus Is Chasing You

The year 2016 felt like, for lack of a better word, an apocalypse. A revealing. I found myself in a dark landscape without a tether. Friendships, partnerships, my sense of place in my church and city, the broader evangelical community—none of it held together anymore. It was the beginning of a season that would leave me feeling completely adrift.

The world at large became seemingly alien, but the disruptions didn't stop with politics and race. Another apocalypse opened up in 2016. Very close to home. Tensions that had nothing to do with political rhetoric or race came to a head in my church, the church I helped plant and had pastored for fifteen years. Concerns about the leadership at our church emerged, met with doubts that the concerns were valid. People took sides. Relationships stretched thin. I happened to share the concerns about a lack of organizational health that had grown impossible to ignore. My wife, Sarah, and I found ourselves cut off from friendships that were decades old. Our wounds, long masked by the momentum of ministry, began to surface, and the physical and psychological toll of spending years in a toxic culture caught up with me. I crashed. Physically and spiritually exhausted, isolated, brokenhearted, I saw a community I loved—one I had poured heart and soul into—on the verge of breaking apart.

Around that time my friend Mike Frazier invited me and my family to a retreat house his church owned just outside Savannah, Georgia.

As I processed the preceding months with him, he read the weariness on my face and in my posture. He asked question after question, surfacing sadness, weariness, and physical exhaustion that I didn't even know were there.

Before leaving he asked about spiritual disciplines—what did prayer look like for me, how was I approaching the Scriptures? I confessed that Scripture was difficult for me. I'd seen it used so often lately as a bludgeon. I struggled to hear it now. Mostly, when I opened a Bible, it was to the Psalms.

"I want to suggest something for you," he said and picked up a Bible off a side table. He turned to 1 Kings 18 and read the story of Elijah confronting the prophets of Baal. He continued to chapter 19, to Elijah lying under the broom tree in the desert, pleading for God to take his life.

When he was finished, he closed the Bible and set it back on the table. He explained nothing to me; he just sat silent there for a long, awkward moment. "You know," he said, "I wonder what might happen if you just spent some time with that story. Especially chapter 19—with tired Elijah."

I nodded. We got up to leave shortly after, and I walked out into a pitch-black Savannah night, back into zero gravity.

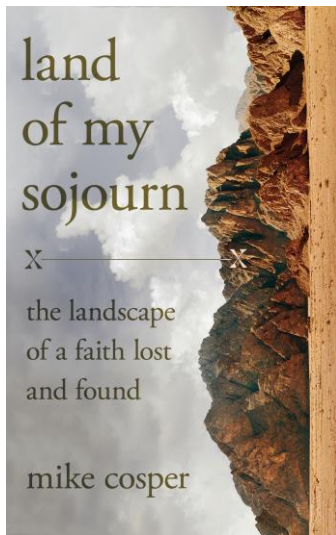


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Not long after that trip to Savannah, I visited the Holy Land with a group of friends. That trip deepened the grip that landscape held on my imagination. The golden light of the Old City at night, the lush green of the Jezreel Valley, the gnarled bard of olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane. After I returned home and continued to navigate the turbulence of my faith, those images kept returning to my mind. They haunted me even as my faith grew thin and brittle.

So, when I finally took Frazier's advice about Elijah, the desert the prophet crashed in was tangible to me in ways that kindled my spiritual imagination. I had been where Elijah had been.

In time Elijah led me to Mount Tabor, the mountain of the Transfiguration, where the old prophet stood and talked with Jesus and Moses while Peter, James, and John watched in awe. This story was far from new to me, so it wasn't a surprise to find those men there. It was a surprise to find someone else there: me.

Reading that story I found myself echoing Peter's words and emotions, that brilliant moment making sense to me in ways I couldn't have imagined before. I then followed Peter onward—to Jerusalem, Gethsemane, and another mountain: Golgotha. And eventually back to the place his story began, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. As I saw echoes of my story in the lives of these two men, I discovered that the journey of my own inner life was nothing new, just like Peter's was nothing new. These men and these mountains made sense of my disillusionment and allowed me to welcome my apocalypse.

In the years since leaving local church ministry, I've devoted an enormous amount of time and resources to examining the church's often troubled witness, its ongoing crisis of leadership, and the epidemic of narcissism, abuse, and cover-up that has continued to emerge year after year. That examination led me to produce *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, a podcast in which I attempted to document just one of many visible leadership collapses and how it sheds light on a branch of the church that is image conscious, charismatic, and contradictory.

This book is about the journey before and undergirding that work. The shattering of dreams and the grace that restored a broken faith in the aftermath. It's a story about grace leading me home when I thought all was lost. In arriving here in a somewhat postapocalyptic place, I can see that remaining in the church wasn't a given. Like so many I know and love, I can easily imagine how my path into the void could have led somewhere other than here, back home. That strikes me as a tremendous mercy, and if there's any reason why I want to tell these stories, it's for a sense of gratitude for that grace.

Taken together, my encounters with Peter, Elijah, and Jesus connected to indelible images from my time in Israel and formed a new spiritual landscape in my mind, one with enough gravity to draw my feet back to solid ground. I still experience moments when I worry that I might sail off into space again. Like when you drive too quickly over a hill, there's a flash of that floating feeling where your stomach and feet seem to drift upward. Thankfully, each time that's happened, gravity and grace have brought my feet back to earth.

I hope that as I tell this story you might find echoes of your own. I pray if you're in the wilderness, you might find that though the territory is a mystery, you are far from alone. Most of all I pray that you rediscover that Jesus is chasing you like a lover—right through heaven's gates.

—Adaptation from the introduction



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BIO



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Host of *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* Podcast

"It's been almost eight years since I left my role at the church. Despite a thousand reasons for which things might be different, I'm still here. By that I mean I'm still a part of Sojourn Church in Louisville, but I mean a lot more than that too.

It's not simple to account for why that's the case, though. The process of writing this book has helped me reckon with it.

This isn't, in fact, the book I set out to write. I thought I was writing a book about the Sermon on the Mount and the ways that vision of the Christian life feels more essential than ever in a post-Trumpian, secularized world. That vision is no small part of the reason why I'm still here, and the up-and-down road of faith in the last seven or eight years has helped me make sense of its message in new ways."

—Taken from chapter nine, "Land of My Sojourn: I'm Still Here."

Mike Cospoer is a writer and podcaster for Christians in a post-Christian world. He's the director of podcasting for *Christianity Today*, where he hosts [The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill](#) and [Cultivated: A Podcast about Faith and Work](#).

Mike also served as one of the founding pastors at Sojourn Church in Louisville, Kentucky, from which he launched [Sojourn Music](#)—a collective of musicians writing songs for the church. He is the author of [Recapturing the Wonder](#), *Faith Among the Faithless*, *The Stories We Tell*, and *Rhythms of Grace*. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky, with his wife, Sarah, and their two daughters.



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