

**CLINGING TO FAITH
THROUGH DOUBT
AND DEPRESSION**

LOSING GOD

MATT ROGERS


IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

CONTENTS

PREFACE . . . 9

ONE . . . Losing God . . . 13

TWO . . . Rejected by God . . . 25

THREE . . . The Dark Side of Sovereignty . . . 35

FOUR . . . Sustaining Graces . . . 47

FIVE . . . Isolation . . . 63

SIX . . . Search for a Cause . . . 79

SEVEN . . . The Wisdom of Mentors . . . 95

EIGHT . . . Signs of Light . . . 113

NINE . . . Embracing Mystery . . . 125

TEN . . . After the Storm . . . 137

APPENDIX . . . Steps Toward Healing . . . 149

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION . . . 159

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION . . . 163

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . 165

NOTES . . . 167

ONE . . .

Losing God

THE BOTTOM CAME A few days before Christmas 1998. I was sitting in an old, dank theater in Charlotte, North Carolina, there to see *Life Is Beautiful*, an Italian film with a terribly ironic title. I didn't know why my good friend Baker Falls had chosen the movie, why he had driven us forty minutes from our hometown to see it, or how he had discovered this musty relic of a theater.

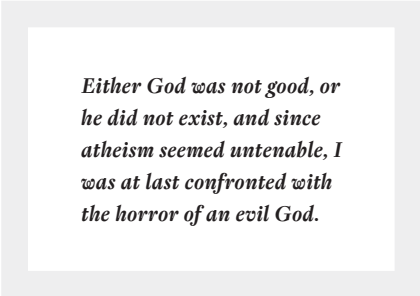
The movie opened harmlessly enough as a lighthearted comedy, and I wagered a little hope that the mix of happy humor and distracting subtitles would provide a couple hours' reprieve from the awful dread that now consumed me. But I was betrayed. *Life Is Beautiful*, at first a sweet, spirited tale set prior to the Holocaust, took a stark turn halfway through, as the Nazi atrocities reached the village of the film's protagonists. From there the story was a freefall to the depths of human wickedness and suffering.

Hope faded quickly as I witnessed one hellish image after another, but I could not turn away. I could not keep from star-

LOSING GOD

ing at the screen. And I could not hide, even in the dark seclusion of this movie theater, from the demons in pursuit. For two years they had been chasing me, shouting blasphemies that were growing ever more difficult to deny. It had been two years since Urbana, since God went silent, and two years of holding back a flood of doubt and dissolution.

In a moment, near the end of the film, the dam broke. The hero of the story turned a corner in a concentration camp and found himself standing before a mound of murdered Jews, their naked, emaciated bodies piled one on top of the next. These people—*God, they were people!*—had been tossed out into some back alley like a heap of discarded mannequins from a



Either God was not good, or he did not exist, and since atheism seemed untenable, I was at last confronted with the horror of an evil God.

department store gone bankrupt. The cinematographer, with frightening deftness of skill, had filled the frame to overflowing with this monument to human depravity, and all I could do was sit there

as the accusations poured through my mind, flushing out the last of my resistance.

I could pretend no longer. Naiveté had led me earlier in life to believe that God was real and benevolent. Now I could see that such hope had been a child's fancy. Either God was not good, or he did not exist, and since atheism seemed untenable, I was at last confronted with the horror

of an evil God. No compassionate deity would suffer his people to endure the outrage unfolding onscreen. And this was merely a re-creation, the bodies no more than a painting rendered in a special effects studio, far removed from the events portrayed.

But the events had happened. They were real. And God had not intervened. For two years I had been crying out for God to assuage my fears about his character and to settle the questions of my faith. Now this film—a damning bit of evidence—assured me that, cry as I might, there would be no answer, just as there had been none for the Jews. Anxiety began to choke me as the condemnation set in. I saw myself in eternity, wailing at the door to God’s presence, knowing he would never open it to me. Like Job in the Old Testament, I was a mix of contradictory emotions, longing for God though repulsed by him.

As the credits rolled, I stumbled out into the night and fell lifeless, like one more victim of the Holocaust, into the passenger’s seat of Baker’s car. Minutes later, over coffee at the Starbucks next door, I unleashed on my friend two years of pent-up grief and anger, which had nowhere else to go but out. Baker knew I had been struggling since the mission convention in Urbana, Illinois, almost two years earlier to the day. Baker was a constant friend and an excellent listener, and we had talked often about my deepening melancholia. But the level of fury this night was new to both of us.

If anything I said over the next hour rattled Baker, he never let on, and I don’t remember any response he might

LOSING GOD

have given. Like most people, Baker was clueless as to what he should say, so he sat attentive and peaceful, just listening as I railed against the tragedy that was sapping my faith and my will to live. Baker took my suffering seriously, but he met all my allegations with the same confident smile that was his silent rebuttal. This was not smugness or arrogance on his part, nor did I receive it that way. I knew he felt tremendous compassion for me, and his smile seemed to say that despite all my confusion, somehow God was still good and life could yet turn around for me. In a mostly one-sided conversation I stated my case against the Creator, and Baker countered with just a smile.

Just a smile, but it was enough. By the time we left the coffee shop an hour later and headed for home, I was backing away from the edge. Baker's steadfast belief that there was cause for hope brought me no closer to a resolution, but it spared me a fatal unbelief that night. My tightened fist unclenched just a little, and I knew that I would hang on for another day to some distant, ethereal hope.

Collapsing exhausted into bed, I reached for my journal and the one part of my day in which I still found slight relief. Writing was therapy and the only means I had found to order the chaos in my mind, a mess of half-completed thoughts and mutinous emotions. I lay on my bed that night working with pen and paper to make sense of the day, and of the last two years. *What went wrong at Urbana, and how did it lead me here to this dead end of faith?*

* * *

I was a second-semester freshman at Campbell University, a small Baptist college in eastern North Carolina, and I was working to surrender whatever selfish desires I needed to lose to find that special calling God had for me. More than anything I wanted my life to count, to not waste it on small dreams and me-centered pursuits, so I listened to my mentors when they confronted me with the great needs of the world. Bruce and J. D. were training for overseas ministry when I met them, and they were baffled that more American Christians were not prepared to give up their comfortable lives to join Jesus on the narrow way of self-sacrifice. They could not understand believers who didn't dream of sharing the gift of salvation with the people in faraway lands where no word of the gospel and Scripture had traveled.

Bruce and J. D. talked often at our Monday night Bible studies of the 1.3 billion people on the planet who had never heard the name Jesus, and I felt ashamed that my heart was barely moved. The number was just a figure to me, an abstraction. I needed faces, individual people whose eyes I could gaze into and see the fear and darkness of humanity separated from its God. Statistics rattled off at Bible studies did nothing for me, so when the brochures for the Urbana Student Mission Convention '96 came around, offering a chance to catch God's heart for the lost, I took one and began asking God if he wanted me there the following December. I told no one back home about Urbana, deciding I should know more about it and if I wanted to go before raising the subject with my parents.

LOSING GOD

By spring, my heart was stirred. I cared little for souls beyond my tiny sphere of influence, and I was bothered enough by that fact to feel responsible to attend Urbana the next school year. The convention, however, cost \$350, money I didn't have as a college student and didn't know where to find.

Over Easter break, still having told no one about Urbana, I visited my home church, happy to see the familiar faces of friends I loved and missed. Ima Jones, a kind and elegant older lady, maybe in her sixties, came over to say hello and pressed a folded piece of paper into my hand as she gave me a hug. After she had walked back to her pew, I sat down in mine and opened the paper: a check for \$350!

I must have stared at that check the rest of the day. Ima didn't know why she had given it, only that she felt she was supposed to and she wanted to. But I knew why. I had no doubt, and soon I was imagining all that God would do in my life with those five days in late December.

* * *

The ride north to Urbana was torture. I was anxious the whole way, nervous about the five days in front of me and near-panicked at having found my introverted self sandwiched on a narrow bus with dozens of young, rambunctious saints, giddy on their way to a great commissioning. *I could have taken a plane.* But you'll meet people on one of the chartered buses, the brochure promised—except that most of the students on my bus came from big schools and were traveling in large groups. (Only two others joined me from our small college, a professor many years my elder and a quiet girl I barely knew

who was on a different bus.) These people weren't looking to meet anyone. They were sharing an adventure with their friends, and after a few failed attempts at conversation, I shrank back into the safety of the little cell formed by my seat and the one in front of me.

All but the very last leg of the journey was in the dark, so there was nothing to see except the mountainous rock formations streaking past my window as the bus climbed into Virginia on I-77. The seats on the bus reclined a pathetic five degrees, not nearly enough to make sleep an option. Even if I'd had a bed, I doubt I could have slept: the bus growled all night as it made its way northwest, and inside, laughter broke out constantly over jokes too far up or down the aisle for me to catch. The monotony of the ride was broken only by my Sony Discman, my compact Bible and two movies—*Mr. Holland's Opus*, which I enjoyed, and *Apollo 13*, which I did not—provided by the charter company.

We stopped a couple times for food, giving me the thrill of a prisoner released from his cell for fresh air and recreation. Then it was back on board, back in the cell and back on the road to what I hoped would be some direction for my life.

Irritable from the long trip, I stepped off the bus thirteen hours later onto the muddy soil of rural Illinois. My feet sank into the saturated earth, and I wondered where all the snow was that I'd heard tales of from Urbana-past. Only a few white patches dotted the flat, unimpressive landscape that was yellow with the dead of winter. I was cold, not from the weather, which was mild for late December, but from an uneasiness

LOSING GOD

within. Anxious and unhappy, for reasons I did not yet know, I'd have rather been anywhere else but there.

After checking into my room in a dorm on campus, I walked around the university grounds with one of my roommates for the conference. I was hoping to make a friend and shake the heaviness off my heart, but the roommate was too independent for conversation. My glumness was feeling more like oppression with every step. *Why do I feel like this? I'm probably just nervous. I always get anxious in new situations. I'll feel better once the conference begins.*

In the evening we gathered, some 17,000 of us, into Assembly Hall. We worshiped and prayed to prepare our hearts as sanctuaries where God would meet with us over the next few days. My heart was unmoved. I was cold still and terribly sad, wishing to God I were back home, enjoying a normal Christmas break. *This is not how it was supposed to be . . . the \$350 . . . I know I'm supposed to be here!*

I could not worship. I didn't even want to. There was a cloud over my mind and a shadow in my heart. I felt nothing but uneasiness and a sense of wrongness, like darkness closing in on a patient succumbing to anesthesia. The light in the room seemed so dim it was hardly light at all, and the sound was noise. My clapping and singing were movement without feeling. I meant none of my words. *It's been a long day. Maybe I'll feel better after I sleep. Dear God, it's been a long day!* But the morning was the same. The anxiety greeted me at dawn, a rock in the pit of my stomach. My soul was cheerless and gray, with the clouds outside my window in full agreement.

Urbana is in a rural setting, with a working farm on campus for the agriculture students, and that morning a steady breeze summoned the stench of animal waste, which mingled with the dew-drenched air. The day was so damp and putrid that the walk to Assembly Hall left my hair wet as if I'd swum through cow urine to get there. More empty songs and prayers started the day, and then it was off to small groups covering every aspect of a life on mission with God.

None of it interested me. I moved through the morning numb to everything I heard, obsessed with how bad I felt and taken by disappointment at the way Urbana was unfolding. *Why God? I'm supposed to find your heart here.*

Testimony time abounded at Urbana, and it was the most crushing, as throngs of happy saints shared rapturous tales of the glories God had shown them. I could not find any reason why the gracious revelations happened here but not back home. They were simply a benefit of the conference, it seemed, thrown in with the price of admission: you show up, grab your room key and meal pass, then meet with God. All for the low cost of \$350. *I showed up too, you know. I got the key and meal pass. Did I forget to check a box on the registration form? Were visions extra?*

Young men and women stood before a "breakout" session of hundreds to renounce their sins of pornography, masturbation or homosexuality. I joined the audience in polite applause for these examples of repentance, but I could not muster enough energy for the cheers that followed each confession. I did not know why I was clapping, or why these

LOSING GOD

people were better for baring their souls to the masses, or what any of this had to do with missions—or why my heart was so unmoved by it all. I decided my heart was poisonous, diseased, rotten. I just wanted to leave, to escape.

We gathered again in the evening at Assembly Hall, and the oppression again weighed heavily on my heart. The fear was overwhelming, making my blood burn like fire beneath my skin. *God, what is wrong? PLEASE tell me what is wrong!*

I sang on—in vain.

He loves me

He loves me

I can really say I know

And I love Him

I love—

I stopped singing because it was a lie, because *I* was a lie. I did not love God, and I could not sing the words anymore. I physically could not sing them. Something in me died in that moment as fear consumed whatever remained of my soul. This was the fear of Judas, once a disciple of Christ, yet in an instant a traitor and a condemned man. Forgiveness dissolved into nothingness, and I felt the full weight of my sin, the guilt of a soul with no affection for its Savior. The grace I knew as a fifteen-year-old boy when I first believed in Christ now seemed a lifetime away. Had it ever been real? Had all my joy back then been a delusion? Was this the point of Urbana, of the \$350, to drag me hundreds of miles from home and show me my heart's true condition before a dreadfully holy God?

Losing God

I stood frozen, a child of wrath, locked outside in the cold and left to die, while a sea of saints worshiped joyfully in the chambers of the God who delighted in them. All I could do was peer longingly through the window of his house and wish I were one of the accepted. *Does God even know I'm out here? Does he care? If I knocked, would he answer?* I feared his rejection: "I never knew you."