

FINDING A PATH THROUGH DOUBT,
DISILLUSIONMENT, AND DEAD ENDS

MID- FAITH CRISIS

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DISCUSSION GUIDE



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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

Where were you when you hit your mid-faith crisis? This question haunts us, because we've all been there. We begin our spiritual journeys full of earnest faith and hope—but life is complicated, and the faith we had at the beginning doesn't always hold up over time.

Still, we are not alone in this crisis. We wrote this book—full of our own vulnerable, broken, hopeful stories—desiring to start a conversation that was honest yet not despairing. Mid-faith crisis is real, and it is common—but it is not the end of the story. Come with us, friends, and see what is on the other side.

If you're reading this book together as a church, book club, or discussion group, be intentional to create a safe space for each other. These are all-too-real areas of fear and pain, and we have not all landed in the same place, or in the same timeframe. We pray that you will find, as we have, a healing and hopeful community together in these pages.

Catherine McNiel and Jason Hague

Chapter 1

LET'S START WITH A MEME

1. How would you describe your current relationship to faith?
2. What words would you use to convey how your faith felt early on, your “How it started”?
3. What words would you use to express how your faith feels now, your “How it’s going?”
4. Jason and Catherine introduce their own faith stories in this first chapter, including “How it started” and “How it’s going” for each of them. What parts of their stories resonate with you? In what ways is your story different from theirs?

Chapter 2

STAGES OF FAITH

1. Catherine and Jason describe four stages of faith a person is likely to experience if they continue on the path of faith long-term. Have you considered the idea that faith development, like life itself, has stages? How does the idea land on you?
2. Of the four stages described here—Inherited Faith, Confident Faith, Mid Faith, and Conscious Faith—where would you place yourself right now? What have the other stages looked like for you? Where do you hope to go in the future?
3. Catherine and Jason write “...each researcher found a similar theme: somewhere deep into the maturing process we hit a wall. There is a season after we have things figured out when everything crumbles apart” (16). What do you think of this? Does this feel like hopeful or discouraging news? In what ways does this make sense of things you or your loved ones have seen or experienced?
4. Catherine and Jason suggest that most churches and Christian ministries are built to move people through Inherited and Confident faith but have little idea what to do with the questions and upheaval of Mid Faith, or a vision to arrive at Conscious Faith What do you think of this? What has your experience been?
5. In what ways have you experienced growth to include ups and downs, rather than steady upward movement?

Chapter 3

WHEN DOUBT CREPT IN

1. Jason describes something he calls “Tinkerbell Faith.” To what degree have you experienced this? In what ways is it similar to, or different from, your faith today?
2. What relationship do you see between faith, certainty, conviction, and doubt? What role does each play in your life seeking God?
3. What were you taught about doubt and the role it plays in the life of faith? What do you think now?
4. What convictions do you hold about how you want to live your life? What do you value enough to invest time and energy into cultivating day by day?
5. Jason describes wrestling with a spiritual director about faith and doubt, receiving the reminder that “...a mustard seed isn’t very much” (45). Does this idea help you? How, or how not?

Chapter 4

WHEN CHURCH WAS HARMFUL

1. In this chapter, Catherine describes the harm she experienced in her childhood church community. What has your experience been with church? Have you found healing and help, or hurt and harm...or both?
2. #ChurchToo stories are increasingly common these days, forming the foundation of many people's faith crisis. What is the risk—and opportunity—in speaking truthfully about these experiences?
3. In the story of the man born blind—and in Catherine's story—why is it significant that Jesus identifies himself as the door? What does this mean for you?
4. What are the markers of a healthy yet imperfect church community versus an unhealthy and toxic church community, do you think? What have you experienced? What have you helped create?
5. If you have been hurt by the church, how are you finding safe people who can know you and be known by you? If you are in a place of health right now, how are you creating safety for those who need healing?
6. Catherine describes how, through decades of pain and healing, she has come to believe that God's goodness has been running after her, all along. How does this land on you? What has your experience been? What do you hope for down the road?

Chapter 5

WHEN OUR HEROS FELL

1. In this chapter, Jason describes the devastating experience of learning that his faith hero was actually a predator. Have you had an experience like this? If so, what impact did it have on you?
2. Why do you think we tend to gravitate towards extolling powerful or famous people? What “influencers” do you look to to lead in your life or faith?
3. In what ways do our fallen heroes impact our understanding of God’s character or Christ’s way in the world—and why? Has your own faith in God’s goodness been marred by a toxic or abusive “hero”?
4. On page 82-84, Jason and Catherine consider a different list of qualifications for the footsteps we might want to follow. Looking at this list, what stands out to you? What would you add? Who do you know that embodies these characteristics? How might you begin to embody them yourself, for the sake of those watching you?

Chapter 6

WHEN OUR PRAYERS FELL SILENT

1. Catherine describes her early childhood understanding of prayer. Do you resonate with her stories? How did you learn to pray, early on?
2. On page 90-91, Catherine wrestles with the tendency to believe that God is the direct cause of small blessings (like finding a good parking spot or a vacation flight arriving on time) but not to be blamed for enormous suffering (like refugees unable to find a safe homeland or a flight to say goodbye to a loved one cancelled). Do you experience this sort of tension? How do you make sense of it?
3. What do you think of the idea that we pray as though we are God's boss, telling him what to do? Does this ring true? Why or why not?
4. Jason describes his tendency to view prayer as using our words to direct God to our to-do list—then describes the freedom they both found in learning to view prayer as an invitation to rest in God's presence, surrender the desire to control, and receive “daily bread” as God's children. How do these ideas resonate or conflict with your own experience and thoughts about prayer?
5. If you have a prayer practice, describe it, and the value you find in it. How does God meet with you through this practice?

Chapter 7

WHEN SUFFERING CONSUMES US

1. Catherine begins this chapter by suggesting that the human experience has always been filled with suffering, often severe suffering, yet today we are not taught or equipped to navigate suffering. What has your experience been? Have you felt prepared for the losses and pain you have encountered?
2. In telling the story of his close friend, Janae, dying of cancer, Jason describes feeling betrayed. In what ways has suffering impacted your faith on this level?
3. Jason and Catherine suggest that many of us understood faith to be a shield against life's worst suffering, because God is good and loves us, and protects those who trust in him. Is this how faith in God was explained to you—either directly or indirectly? What do you think of this, now?
4. Jason describes a poem by Malcome Guite that, along with the psalms, helped him see an invitation to wrestle with God and suffering, to sling and hurl our grievances at God. What do you think of this practice? How might this be a practice of faith rather than faithlessness?
5. What losses and griefs are you wrestling, today? Where is God in them, do you think?

Chapter 8

WHEN OUR BELIEFS COLLAPSED

1. Were you introduced to Christian faith as a set of truth-false claims you needed to get right? If so, what does that look like for you, now?
2. John and Sophia describe their faith community as having an unspoken understanding: “You belong with us because you believe with us.” Does that resonate with you? What is compelling about this kind of community—and what is dangerous about it?
3. Have you experienced a faith-crisis in which you realized several foundational beliefs of your faith were not actually connected to Jesus’ teaching or historic Christian teaching? What impact did this have on your faith, sense of trust, identity, or safety in community?
4. Even if we try, it is hard to leave behind “such high stakes thinking” (141) and we tend to simply move to a different set of true-false litmus tests, a different set of people to point fingers at for being wrong (in order to feel the comfort of being right). What practices might help you quiet your nervous system and encounter a God who does not require you to be right before you can be loved?

Chapter 9

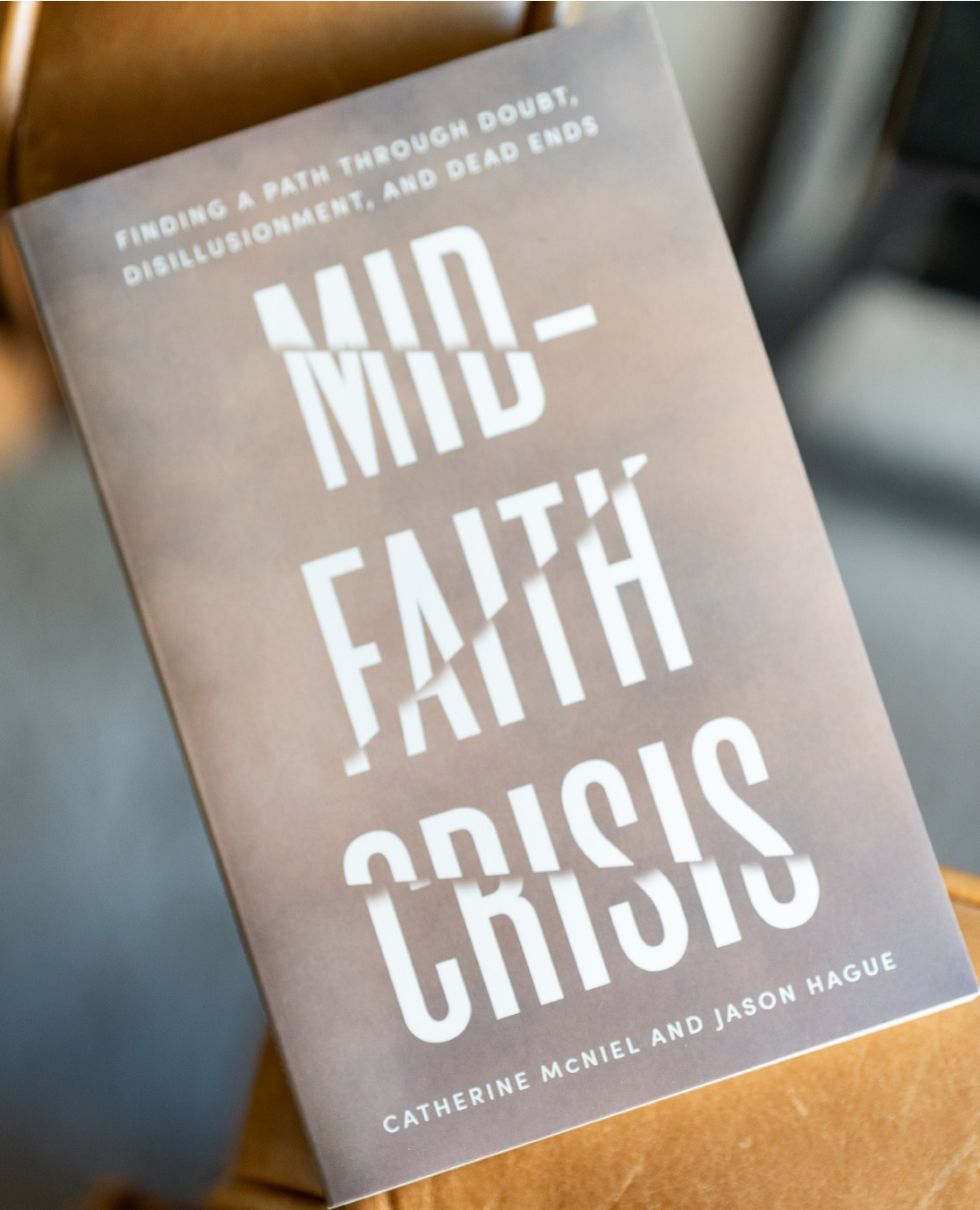
WHEN FEELING FADE

1. Catherine describes several silly childhood songs that introduced faith in God with constant happy feelings. Did you hear a similar message when you were introduced to faith? What impact did this have on you, if any?
2. Catherine suggests that even if we understand that following God does not mean a life free from suffering, we still hope God will provide us with the emotional resilience to make it through suffering without sinking into depression or despair. Does this ring true to you? Why or why not?
3. Catherine and Jason introduce us to the Ignatian idea of Consolation and Desolation as twin components of life and faith. Do you agree that each can lead us forward down the path to God? How has consolation worked in your life? How has desolation worked in your life?
4. Jason describes the elders of his faith community confirming God's faithful over time, even though they experienced a lifetime of suffering and loss. Have you had the experience of looking back and realizing that God was present in pain—even if it didn't feel that way at the time? How does this change things?

Chapter 10

TRADING GREATNESS FOR GOODNESS

1. In this chapter, Jason and Catherine suggest that often the “how it started” of our faith is a promise of greatness...a false promise that is not true to Jesus’ invitation. Does this ring true to you? In what ways did you expect, even unconsciously, for faith to be a road towards greatness?
2. Jason and Catherine then consider that goodness, not greatness, is what God has been inviting us to seek. What do you make of that? How does this fit with your experience?
3. Catherine and Jason tell stories in this chapter of watching decaying compost become the soil of new life, of their own years of suffering moving them to extend compassion to those in pain, and of God as a shepherd leading through the dark valley. Do any of these metaphors or stories resonate with your own journey? What story or metaphor would you tell?
4. Who do you know that has found a steady, peaceful hope on the other side of faith crisis? Does this appeal to you? Why or why not?



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