

"Brilliant. . . Tools like this can change the world."

RICK WARREN, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*

TRUE STORY

A Christianity
Worth Believing In

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PROLOGUE

A Crisis of Faith

ALTAR

The drizzle sprayed lightly on the windshield as Caleb drove home. The day had been tough, so he turned off the music to think more clearly. He could now hear the sound of rain gently hitting the roof of the car, the baritone rhythm of the wiper blades, and the occasional swish of rubber running over wet asphalt.

His slim frame let out a long sigh. Though he was only a sophomore at the University of Washington, his life seemed a total failure. His microbiology midterm score was low enough to put his medical school future on the altar.

Kill it mercifully, he thought as he wrung the steering wheel.

Med school wasn't even his idea. He pictured his dad crossing his arms and his mom shooting deadly looks if he ever told them he didn't want to go. It sent a chill down his back.

"Asian parents," he sighed. He quickly decided not to tell them about his midterm, at least not tonight.

He made his way down Forty-Fifth Street, approaching the right turn where he would head north on I-5. As he merged onto the freeway, he didn't pay attention to the small streaks his aging wiper blades left on the windshield. Instead, his mind was on something else entirely.

BENTO

Earlier that day Caleb and Anna had been having a late lunch over a couple of teriyaki-chicken bentos at Naoko's. The lunch crowd had already thinned out, leaving only three other customers in the restaurant, so they were able to sit near the window.

Caleb had met Anna Hughes in Psych 202—biopsychology—last quarter when they'd been assigned to the same group project. They became good friends. Today, she wore a secondhand-store jacket over a black T-shirt that said, "Save Darfur." And he couldn't help noticing the way her blonde hair rested on her shoulders. But he didn't want to stare, so he instinctively looked down at the pieces of tofu and seaweed floating in his bowl of miso soup.

After a sip of the soup, Caleb looked up to see her blue eyes staring hard at him. She had a habit of doing this, especially when she wanted to grab his attention from the mire of his own thoughts—and it always unnerved him. He'd been silently repeating his mantra of the afternoon: *No, this isn't a date. We're just friends.*

He coughed, blushed a bit and put the soup back on the table. He stared for a moment at the billowing clouds of miso turning in his bowl. She didn't seem to care.

“What’s up?” he said, trying to be nonchalant.

“I saw something today that totally bugged me,” she said. “I was in Red Square on my way to class. Did you know there was a Pride rally today? It was wet out there, but lots of people still came out. And it was crazy—costumes, makeup, all of that. But what bugged me was the group of people on the sidelines. They shouted and screamed, yelling and saying nasty things. They held signs that said, ‘God hates fags’ or ‘AIDS is God’s curse.’ They started chanting, ‘Burn in hell! Burn in hell!’ They were Christians! And they were angry.”

“But—” started Caleb, lifting his hands in protest.

“I know, I know,” she said. “Not all Christians are like that. Relax, will you? I’m not talking about you. But come on: what good is Christianity if it makes people like that? What good is any religion if it just makes them angry, critical and narrow-minded?”

He tried to cut in again. “I’m not finished,” she said. She spoke slowly now. “It finally hit me. They reminded me of the church I used to go to. You know, I used to go all the time before college, but I haven’t been back since. Maybe they’re not out there with picket signs yelling at gays and lesbians. But they were pretty critical. The youth pastor always made me feel totally guilty. Every week I had to sit and listen to him pick at every tiny fault I had. I couldn’t have any fun—I couldn’t even breathe. Either I listened to the wrong radio stations, asked the wrong questions, wore the wrong clothes or dated the wrong boyfriend. They even tried to cast a demon out of me—I think they called him ‘Bob.’”

Caleb smiled at that one.

“I couldn’t get it right the way you did,” Anna said, now with more gravity. “God wanted it perfect, and he was always looking down at me, hoping I’d be better but knowing I never would be. He was always right—I was always wrong. It’s like he had a report

card, and I always came out below the curve. I can't help but think he's bummed out, disappointed and pissed off with me. And isn't God looking down at the Pride rally too? Isn't he just as critical, shaking his head and writing them off too?" She pointed at Caleb accusingly.

Her intensity carried her like a river's current. "Yeah, he probably is. Just like everyone at church. Just like the people at the Pride rally. Just like my dad. He was a deacon at our church, and he . . ." Anna's voice trailed off and she fixed her gaze over Caleb's shoulder, watching the cars pass by outside the restaurant window.

Caleb wondered what she was looking at. He waited for her to say something else. She didn't, so he glanced around the room, looking for anything to distract him from the awkward silence. He couldn't figure out what was going on. He heard a few more cars swoosh by on the wet concrete. Then he shifted in his chair, and the throbbing pulse in his ears grew louder and louder.

With a tear falling and her teeth clenched, Anna broke the silence. "Christianity's just another screwed-up religion! Look at what Christians do: they guzzle gas with their SUVs, join the NRA, picket abortion centers, bomb other countries and spend, spend, spend at the mall, right? They only care about themselves. Seriously, what has Christianity done for us—or the world for that matter? They're just a bunch of hypocrites, that's what I think! Are they good for anything?" At the word *good*, her hands hit the table with a thud that drew the glance of the other customers.

She glared at Caleb while wiping away tears, waiting for a reply. Long seconds ticked away. He scrambled back into his mind, trying to find something that would sound great, hoping that something—anything—would give him the right words to cool off the white heat of anger. But he found none. He wished he could transform into an ostrich

and stick his head in the sand. He furrowed his brow even further. He exhaled hard and shrugged his shoulders, saying the only truthful thing he could at that time.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “I just don’t know.”

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