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Wandering Toward God



**Finding
Faith amid Doubts and
Big Questions**



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Wandering but Not Lost

**I wonder as I wander, out under the sky,
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.**

JOHN JACOB NILES

Not all who wander are lost.

J. R. R. TOLKIEN

Once was significantly lost. When I was a college student in northern Wisconsin, my dad and I were hiking on a trail that was somewhat familiar to me. I had been on this trail just a few weeks before and thought I would take us on a shortcut to get to some bluffs with a terrific view. It was, like many attempted shortcuts in life, a bad idea. We ended up getting off trail and wandering for a couple of terrifying hours. Then, all of a sudden, a man comes walking through the forest and we were saved! As it turns out he was deep in the forest scoping the land for a future hunting trip and we just happened to cross paths. We honestly wondered if he was an angel in disguise—it all felt a bit miraculous.

Wandering when lost is quite dangerous because you never know where you'll end up. Northern Wisconsin has thousands

of miles of uninhabited forest. Had we gotten pointed in a different direction, I may not be here writing this sentence.

Now I'm not sure this man knew just where he was either. It took him a few moments to get his bearings. But there was an important difference between him and us. He had a compass and a map, and he knew the general direction of where we were.

Wandering can be scary. My dad and I were in a dangerous situation. But sometimes it's the best way to arrive at your destination. We can, like the man who saved us, wander with purpose. Life doesn't always give us a well-marked trail. We have to make our own way toward a destination. Wandering is not the problem, but wandering aimlessly is. There is risk of getting lost and we should take due caution, but the adventure is typically well worth the risk. Journeys like these profoundly change our lives.

In the novel *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien, there is a poem called the "Riddle of Strider." One stanza goes like this:

All that is gold does not glitter;
Not all who wander are lost.¹

The poem is meant to convey a sense that things are not always as they appear. Things of value may come quite unexpectedly in dark figures like Strider and humble figures like hobbits.

One of Tolkien's most famous lines is "Not all who wander are lost." It's a great line, but what does it mean? It points to a winding journey filled with twists and turns but that's nonetheless intentional and traveled with purpose.

This is certainly true of the many journeys and adventures Tolkien beautifully describes in *The Lord of the Rings*, but it's also a lot like the journey of Christian faith. Now, we don't tend to associate wandering with faith, at least not in a positive light. But

that's because many Christians have a rather thin notion of faith. For them, faith is just some decision we made along the way, not unlike the decision of where to go to college or what car to buy.

People identify with these decisions. Are you a Toyota person or is it Ford for you? Your being an alumnus of a certain university or college tends to follow you wherever you go. These things are identifying. You've joined the club.

Genuine faith, however, is not a *mere* decision, and you are not a mere member of a Christian club. To be sure, faith may begin with a decision. But it's a decision to begin a journey, an adventure, as we come to know the living God. It's a journey that is thrilling; sometimes terrifying and difficult (there are typically dragons along the way, as Tolkien would remind us) filled with twists, turns, suspense, drama; and times of both unimaginable joy and pain. Part of that journey of faith is the questions that come. Questions can sometimes turn into doubts. This, I suggest, is an important part of the journey of faith. We wander not as those who are lost but who are intentionally seeking God, encountering and pushing through challenges as they come. It's the only way to arrive at this destination.

Doubts and Big Questions

There I was in a seminary class, of all places, having a crisis of faith. We were only a few weeks into the semester, but I was seriously doubting my Christian beliefs. My growing-up experience was strongly Christian. If the church doors were open, my family was there, and we were involved. Generationally, my family had been doing formal ministry since at

least my great-great-grandparents! And I was all-in from an early age. Somehow I made it through Sunday school, summer camp, youth group, countless youth events, Bible college, summer ministry, and international mission trips without deeply questioning my faith. I made a commitment to Christ at a young age and just assumed it was true from that point on. At this moment in seminary it hit me like a splash of ice-cold water—the kind that takes your breath away. I had never seriously considered *why* I should think Christianity is true above all other worldviews.

I'm sure as a kid I asked questions along the way. But there's a difference between considering the truth of Christianity when everyone knows the answer (or think they do) and deeply considering its truth with a real possibility of its being wrong. There's the *Let's have a fun discussion about Christianity* sort of considering. And then there's the painful, teary-eyed, scared to death struggle of considering whether it's really true. I had never done the latter until I found myself doubting in seminary.

It is quite common for Christians to experience doubts from time to time. Unfortunately, doubts about our Christian beliefs are often treated in the same way we would treat a common cold. We wait it out, treat symptoms as best as we can (perhaps with a good dose of prayer and Bible study), and hope it goes away. This approach might work for some. But for many others, the doubts creep back in and they return with friends! As the doubts compound, Christianity can begin to feel un compelling for this reason alone. Notice, it's not for a lack of evidence. It's simply because there are doubts that are left untreated. Sadly, many abandon their Christian faith because they cannot find

a safe place to admit and talk about their doubts. Rather than our questions and doubts being a part of the adventure as we wander toward God, without a safe place to doubt our faith Christianity can feel like a fake.

My story is different. I leaned into my doubts. I asked those difficult questions in a lonely backroom of a church I had been given to work in while in seminary. I began to read. I had conversations with people further along in their journey than I was. I began to find answers. Even though I still had plenty of questions (and still do today), I began to see my way clear of some problems. I didn't fall away. In fact, my faith grew stronger. The irony is, I became even more well-grounded in my faith. By leaning into my doubts, I came to a place of deeper faith.

Doubting While Faithful

How about you? Do you have questions? Are you seeking and searching? Are you doubting? If you have questions about Christianity or are struggling with doubt, I want you to know that *you are normal!* Hear this: *You. Are. Normal.* The honest struggle of questions and doubts is not sin. You are not failing. You are courageous—probably more courageous than others who act like they have it all figured out. I respect you. It's most likely that you are doubting your faith precisely because you are intellectually honest and are seeking truth rather than mere acceptance by your peers. This can be a lonely place, but please hear me: *You are not alone!* Some of the most ardent defenders of the Christian faith wandered toward God with doubts and big questions.

For others who, like me growing up, have never really considered the reasons why you should believe; it's time to do so.

Let me be clear. I don't want you to doubt your faith just for the sake of doubting it. Though doubting and deconstructing faith is a popular thing these days and leaning into doubt can lead to good things (such as a well-grounded faith), doubt is not good as an end in itself. But I do want you to ask questions. And hard questions often lead to having some doubts along the way. It isn't always easy. But here's the good news: you are reading a book that sees having doubts and big questions as perfectly compatible with having faith and is a normal and valuable part of the journey to a deeply grounded faith.

We don't want to stay in the grip of doubt. Again, doubt is not the destination. We may be wandering but we are wandering *toward* God. God is the destination. To be a bit more accurate, truth is the destination. Doubting forces us to take a careful look at what's true. I found God waiting for me. I was wandering, to be sure, but I was wandering in pursuit of God.

Doubting from Six Miles Up

Let's talk about airplanes. While flying on an airplane is quite commonplace today, it's almost absurd when you stop to think about it. We strap into a little seat in this huge metal craft, drive down a little road, and lift off into the atmosphere! We can cross oceans and continents in a matter of hours. People of a previous era would be awestruck or would perhaps not even believe this is a real thing.

As extraordinary as it is, most of us don't know much about the science of flight. We haven't a clue about how a large and heavy aircraft can lift off the tarmac into the sky. But many of us get on board and are so confident and relaxed that we may

even take a nap. We entrust our whole lives to the process (that is, we entrust ourselves to the airplane and the pilots, mechanics, engineers, and so on). Unless you are the sort of person who packs a parachute in your carry-on, you can't sort of or partly entrust yourself to an airplane when you fly. It's your whole life or you don't get on. And though airplanes are relatively safe, there is a big risk to this. When things go wrong on an airplane, they typically go *very* wrong!

Let's suppose you and I are sitting in the airport awaiting an upcoming flight, and someone approaches and begins to raise all kinds of questions designed to cast doubt on us getting on board.

- THEM** Are you about to get on this airplane?
US (looking around to make sure he's talking to us) Uh, yes, we are.
- THEM** Do you know how airplanes work?
US (sheepishly smiling) Well, not really.
- THEM** Really? And you are about to get on board?
US Yeah.
- THEM** Do you know at what altitude the airplane cruises?
US I think we heard the captain say something about 30,000 feet.
- THEM** Yes! You realize that's about six miles off the planet, right?
US Never thought of it that way.
- THEM** It's a 747, right?
US I guess so.
- THEM** Do you know how much a 747 weighs?
US Uh, no, but I'm guessing a lot.

- THEM** Yes, a lot! A 747 weighs in at about one million pounds!
- US** Really? That *is* a lot.
- THEM** Do you know what an airplane is made of?
- US** Well it looks like it's mostly made of metal.
- THEM** Right. It's a million pounds of mostly metal.
- US** (looking at each other with a little anxiety) Wow.
- THEM** Do you know how many processes have to be timed precisely for the airplane to fly through the air?
- US** (simply shaking our heads)
- THEM** Thousands!
- US** (We both gulp)
- THEM** Here's the big question: Does it make any sense that a craft made of mostly metal, weighing a million pounds, with thousands of processes that must be timed perfectly can lift off the ground and fly through the air at six miles off the planet? Are you willing to entrust yourself to this?

We both begin to feel nervous. We're intellectually struggling a bit with how an airplane doesn't just fall out of the sky.

But here's the thing. When my seat section is called, I'm going to get on the airplane despite these doubts. And I bet you would too (especially if we are going somewhere tropical with a beach)! This is because, even if we can't answer the person's questions and even if this fact creates an intellectual struggle within us, we typically (and this is key) know enough about airplanes to rationally get on board. That is, we may not know how it all works, but most of us have sufficiently good reason from experience, both ours and others', to get on board despite

our doubts. We could even be on board the airplane, cruising at 30,000 feet in the air, entrusting our very lives to it, and continue to struggle with these questions. We are having doubts about flying—while flying!

When it comes to faith, most of us jump on board not because we have it all figured out but because we know enough to trust Christ. We had the gospel presented to us, the Spirit of God moved in our lives and we placed trust—but we still have lots of questions. The mere presence of an unanswered question or even a few doubts should not destroy faith any more than our unanswered questions about flying should keep us from our tropical beach.

With these things in mind, if you are doubting your faith, I want to encourage you to take a deep breath. Your faith need not hang in the balance only if you can somehow get rid of all your doubts by the end of the day. This pressurizes the situation and keeps you from being able to think clearly about the questions you have. So let me take some pressure off. You can question and even doubt your faith while entrusting your life to the truth of Christianity.

Doubt Versus Unbelief

Why is this? Faith and doubt are consistent because, as Os Guinness points out, “Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Unbelief is.”²² Having doubts, even serious doubts, does not mean you don’t have faith. Faith and doubt are not opposites like black and white. In fact, doubt seems to require some measure of faith or at least belief. Think about it: if you didn’t believe in Christianity, then there would be nothing to doubt. We doubt those things we

still believe until we resolve the doubt or we stop believing. So doubt only makes sense in the context of belief and faith.

Now we may go from a place of doubt to a place of unbelief. In the Bible the term *unbelief* is often used in a particular way. It's not the mere lack of a belief. As Guinness puts it, unbelief "is usually used of a willful refusal to believe or of a deliberate decision to disobey." He goes on, "Unbelief is a state of mind that is closed against God, an attitude of heart that disobeys God as much as it disbelieves the truth. Unbelief is the consequence of a settled choice."³ Guinness makes the point that unbelief is an act of the will.

When it comes to doubt, in its most basic sense, we don't typically choose to doubt. We make choices in light of our doubts, but whether we struggle with doubt in a particular area is not typically up to us.

It's much like the distinction between feelings of affection and acts of love. We can't just choose to feel affection for someone, but we do choose to act lovingly. The feelings of affection may come and go, but we may choose to love someone even if we are not "feelin' it" at a particular moment. We can of course make choices that help cultivate or change our feelings of affection with, say, a family member who's hard to love. But the feelings themselves are not directly up to us.

Doubt is like this. We may start to struggle a bit as we ask deep and difficult questions about our faith. In this, we are not choosing to struggle. This is just how it strikes us. We can choose to investigate our doubts or just ignore them, hoping they go away. That is, we have many choices in light of the doubts, and our choices may lead us to a place of greater or

lesser doubts. However, doubts arise in us when we have questions we can't answer and we begin to struggle with this. We can choose unbelief and intellectually ignore or walk away, or we can choose faith. Faith is the opposite of unbelief in that we choose (as we'll see in chap. 4) to lean in and venture in trust rather than willfully refusing to believe.

I can illustrate the distinction between doubt and unbelief with the story of the apostle Thomas. Though he is often labeled as “doubting” Thomas, his issue is not mere doubt (see John 20:24-29). It seems to be a struggle with unbelief. As the story goes, Thomas was the only one who wasn't present to see the risen Jesus when he first appeared to the disciples (John 20:19-23). Imagine how you would feel if you were Thomas. The person he had committed his life to in discipleship has just been shamefully executed. He thought this was going to be a movement in which Jesus, as the Jewish Messiah, would become king of Israel. But it didn't happen. Jesus is dead. Or at least he was dead. As it turns out, every one of Jesus' closest followers sees Jesus risen from the dead—except Thomas. When the other disciples tell Thomas they have seen the Lord, Thomas doesn't only want to see the risen Jesus but also wants to put his finger into his wounds! He demands it, otherwise, as he says, “I will not believe” (v. 25).

We don't know all of what was going on in the heart of Thomas; however, it looks like he has become stubborn and raised the intellectual stakes considerably. Perhaps he is feeling hurt in being left out. In any case, he doesn't seem to be struggling with doubts about what he believes as much as refusing to believe. It's not as if he's weighing the evidence and is not yet

convinced. He disregards the testimonial evidence of his closest friends. In the face of their testimony he says he will never believe unless he gets what the other disciples got—and more. This, it seems to me, is not a mere intellectual battle of the mind. It's the stubbornness of the heart.

The core struggle of doubt, on the other hand, is not willful; it is not a choice. If we had a choice, most of us would never choose to doubt. By its nature it's a struggle with what to believe, which is often an unenjoyable place to be. If we could shake the doubts, we would.

Eyeing the Ledge of Faith

Not long ago I was a speaker at a camp, and the activity for the day was rappelling down a rock face. Rappelling is rock climbing in reverse. We start from the top of a rock face, are strapped in by ropes, and walk backward (or, if we are experienced, jump backward) down the rock face, letting out rope as we go. Someone below us is also holding the rope in case we start to fall. So there's very little possibility of actually falling, but here's the thing: when we first learn to rappel, we feel like we are going to fall at almost every moment, especially getting over the first ridge of the rock face. It can be quite terrifying.

Every time I have gone rappelling with students, there are always three kinds of people. The first—call this person Suzy—gets strapped in and without hesitation scoots down the rock. She is supremely confident. It may be because she is a thrill seeker and just doesn't have inhibitions about such things. But, for the sake of the analogy, let's assume Suzy has rappelled before. This is old hat for her, and her confidence is because she

knows from experience the ropes will hold her securely and can be trusted.

The second, we'll call him Larry, is nervous, but he does go down. Larry has never done this before and hesitates, has deep doubts about whether it's a good idea to be on a rock face at that moment, and has to be coaxed down the rock face, perhaps every step of the way. Notice Larry is not choosing to be fearful here. It seems clear that if Larry could be confident, he would choose to be confident. He's having an internal battle and, at moments, his decision to go down hangs in the balance. But Larry chooses to go down despite the internal battle. While he doesn't scoot down the rock face quickly, as Suzy did, both Suzy and Larry had faith. Suzy was a lot more confident in placing her faith in the ropes, the harness, the clips, and the person on the ground holding the ropes. Larry struggled, but he also chose to have faith in these things. Suzy's experience is the more mature experience. If Larry continues rappelling, then he will likely get there at some point. But the point is they both go down the mountain face!

Contrast these to a third person, John. John gets to the top and looks over the edge and says, "Uh, no way," and refuses to go down. There is almost always one or two in the group who get to the top of the rock face but refuse to go a step further, and no amount of coaxing can get them to even consider strapping into the ropes, much less trust that they'll hold them up. John may have an internal battle in a way similar to Larry, but John chooses to stay on the ground that is horizontal rather than go vertical over the rock edge. While Suzy and Larry make the same decision, John's decision is different. John

chooses not to rappel at all. John chooses not to place his faith in the ropes, harness, and so on.

People who are struggling with doubt are in a struggle similar to Larry's. It's not an enjoyable place to be in the midst of the battle, but there can be important life lessons to be had in those moments. Larry and John are probably somewhat envious of Suzy's confidence. But they are new to this and are also human beings. It's part of the human experience to struggle from time to time. Just like Larry and John don't choose to struggle with fear, we don't simply choose to struggle with our doubts. But, like Larry, we can choose to move toward faith as we face our doubts, even if it is inch by inch.

This book is designed for people like Larry who are eyeing the ledge of faith. It is not aiming to convince the committed non-Christian. If a person, like John, refuses to move even one inch toward the ledge, then what we say here will not be very helpful. Unfortunately, this is the all-too-common experience with many committed atheists. Just as many religious believers are unwilling to question their religious beliefs, many atheists seem unwilling to genuinely consider their possibility. These are often paradigm cases of unbelief. While I hope the committed atheist (as well as religious believers) will consider having an open mind, the focus here is for someone willing to honestly look at the case for faith.

We face a rock ledge with a steep drop. Fear and trepidation are quite normal and caution is appropriate. I will not be recommending a wild and incautious leap of faith over the edge. It's typically a bad idea to leap over a rock ledge with no knowledge or reasons to believe it will go well. And I don't

think God expects this either when it comes to faith. While we do ultimately stake it all on the reality of God, faith shouldn't be an irrational leap. Don't get me wrong, there will be plenty of instances when we will have to trust in the face of uncertainty and when we are intimidated and being pulled in the opposite direction. Faith takes courage, and there's always a risk. Despite our fears, we'll need to choose to inch our way toward the ledge and peer over. We'll need to lean into the ropes. And in my experience with rappelling as well as Christian faith, those ropes hold strong. It can be terrifying, but taste and see that the Lord is good and he's there and he's worthy of our complete trust.

This is a book for searchers and seekers who are quite open to coming down the rock face even though they are facing the obstacles of unanswered questions and doubts. I am assuming that if you are doubting Christianity, you believe but you're in the midst of intellectual tension. You are at the crossroads, and perhaps the only clear thing is that the path forward is unclear. If that's you, welcome to the journey. It's going to involve some wandering, but it's well worth the trip as we wander toward God.

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