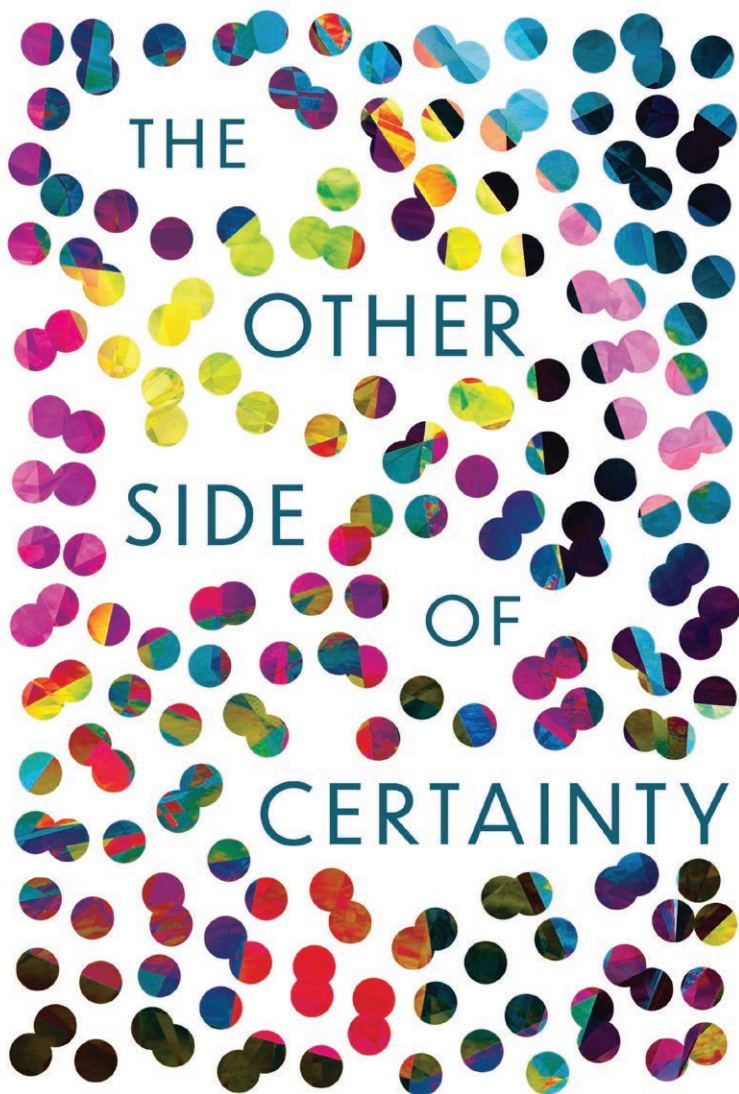


KRISTIN MOCKLER YOUNG Foreword by Erin Moon



THE  
OTHER  
SIDE  
OF  
CERTAINTY

How to Follow Jesus When Easy Answers No Longer Work



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# 1

## LIVING IN THE TENSION

*If our theology doesn't shift and change over our lifetimes,  
then I have to wonder if we're paying attention.*

SARAH BESSEY, *OUT OF SORTS*

*The line of good and bad is not so clean and  
what we are is something in between.*

"DO A LITTLE GOOD," *SPIRITED*

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**THE FIRST SERMON I EVER** preached was in late 2019. I'd been in ministry for less than two years and hadn't even considered getting ordained yet. (I was a regular decent person, not holy like a pastor.) But I had this word, *tension*, that kept popping up everywhere I looked. Has this ever happened to you? Like when you think about getting a new car and then that's the only car you see on the road? Or when you do a Google for a supplement to solve whatever your current fixation is and then you see it in your feed? (Okay, maybe that one's a little different because it's the algorithm gods spoon-feeding you ads.)

This happened to me for a solid year. The word *tension* was everywhere, even though it was a word I had only ever previously used to write a physics paper. *Tension*. Like a light-bulb marquee a



la *Roxie Hart* in Chicago. So when we decided to do a sermon series called “Me, Also Me,” I knew it was my time.

You probably have your own “me, also me” tensions. I want to be a Pinterest mom for my girls’ birthday parties, but I’m also a chuck-an-Uncrustable-in-the-lunchbox-on-the-way-out-the-door mom most days. I take in all kinds of research and data and best practices from books and podcasts on how to be the most effective leader I can be, but I also succumb to the brain rot of reality TV on the couch when all the tips and strategies feel overwhelming.

### **Tensions on the Brink of Breaking**

When it comes to faith, the tensions are a lot more volatile. Is faith enough to be saved or do we need to do works to prove our faith? Are guilt and punishment good because they make us feel bad when we sin or should we live in grace because God already forgave us, knew we were gonna mess up, and loves us anyway? How do we believe that God is real and with us when it seems like there’s no end in sight to the prayer we’ve been praying and the doubt is creeping ever closer as we wait? (You may have just highlighted this entire paragraph because it’s the reason you stopped going to church altogether or at least feel frustrated when you attend. Or it’s the reason the Bible is so hard to read. Or it’s why you’re tempted to walk away from Christianity completely because, honestly, the mental gymnastics are exhausting.)

On one side there’s a legalistic, black-and-white religion that provides an answer to everything. God is clear. The Bible is literal. There is never a need for questions because every word on the page is chosen as if God himself had picked up the quill and scribed it. This is the side of certainty. Many people who live on the side of Religious Certainty will tell you that the other side is absolutely buck-wild. It’s an anything-goes, worshiping-all-the-gods bachelor

party that makes *The Hangover* look like a child's playdate. It's where people twist the Scriptures so they can justify sinning and lawlessness in the name of Jesus.

But what about the other side? Everyone is free to venture out of Religious Certainty to explore what exists beyond the boundaries. The catch is, only those who are willing to walk out the tension of the tightrope will see what other options exist. You can't experience a new place until you're brave enough to venture into it. The fact that you picked up this book may be a sign that you're ready to see what else there is. As Knox McCoy wrote in *All Things Reconsidered*, "We don't always see the full picture immediately. Once we do . . . it may reveal that our initial assumptions were incorrect . . . or seeing the full picture may confirm that our first instinct was the right one all along."

As you explore, you may find a new place to land and live, a space that feels more like home than Religious Certainty ever did. Or you may decide it isn't for you, so you'll collect a couple of souvenirs and go back to what you've always known. The point isn't to evict you from your home and force you to adopt a new address. The choice will always be yours, and it will be between you and God. But sometimes home feels like the best place to live only because we've never been anywhere else.

## Seeing a New Perspective

Luckily for us, we're not the first people to leave what we've known in search of more. It's not a stretch to say that Paul is one of the most influential leaders of Christianity. But he didn't start that way.

Our boy Paul was super anti-Christian. As in, he violently oppressed them with harmful intent. Paul, known then as Saul, was part of an ultra-religiously conservative group of Jewish leaders called the Pharisees. They adhered to strict laws and customs

because they believed that upholding tradition kept them pure. It was a way to prove their devotion to God as well as a way to prove their righteousness to the people around them. As studied leaders, they believed God had already revealed himself through Abraham and Moses, so anything that wasn't explicitly spelled out in the Torah or passed down from their ancestors was not considered holy. While Midrashic questioning existed within Jewish teaching, many Pharisees had allowed their interpretations to harden into legalism, where protecting the law mattered more than curiosity. Their certainty of God made questions blasphemous, as if the pursuit of knowing more offended God himself.

It was this strict, unwavering adherence to a black-and-white faith practice that led to the persecution of anyone acknowledging Jesus as God. Nuanced conversations weren't just hard to have; there was zero space for tolerance or complexity. As you can see in a variety of places in Scripture where Jesus interacts with the Pharisees, they saw him as a false prophet who broke the laws they lived and died by.<sup>1</sup> Even when they were willing to engage with him theologically, his integrity as a leader was compromised in their eyes, because instead of keeping himself holy, he interacted with people they considered ungodly. Some of them even believed he was being used by Satan to lead God's chosen people astray.

So one day as Paul/Saul is on his way to get a warrant for the arrest of anyone he comes across who's a follower of Jesus, God himself shines a spotlight on him so bright that it puts Saul on the ground.<sup>2</sup> Jesus comes over the heavenly loudspeaker like, *My guy, why are you being like this? What did I ever do to you?* and tells him to await further instruction in Damascus, the next town on their way. Saul stands up and realizes the light has completely blinded him, so his traveling buddies, who are confused by what they have heard but not seen, must lead him by the hand.

Meanwhile, God tells Ananias, a Jesus-following dude who lives in Damascus, to go lay hands on Saul so his vision will come back. *No thank you very much, I'd like to keep living today*, Ananias tells God. As he tends to do, God annoyingly wins, and Ananias does what he's been asked to do. Saul regains his vision and gets baptized, and they go to dinner together. It takes some convincing of both the Jews and the Gentiles, but Paul starts preaching Jesus immediately.

### When Certainty Stinks

We can't know that he never looked back, though. Because maybe he did, as many of us also do when we find ourselves questioning the certainty we've known. Like when a kid learns to swim, there's comfort in knowing where the edge of the pool is in case you change your mind and need to cling back on. If you've ventured into unknown waters yet found yourself back at the safety of the edge when you feared going under, it's okay. It's a natural instinct to go back to the things that feel solid under our fingers. But if you just keep swimming, you'll get further and further from the edge until you realize that you're not contained in a pool; you're out in the vastness of open water. With Jesus as your lifejacket, snorkel, and scuba instructor, what may have seemed overwhelmingly terrifying can be peaceful, inspiring, and full of new discoveries.

In a later letter to the church of Philippi, Paul does reflect on his time as a Pharisee.<sup>3</sup> He reminds the people that, because of the freedom they've found in Jesus, their salvation is no longer determined by their own self-righteousness but found only in Jesus Christ himself. He lists the things he used to do, the checklist of religious practices that proved his own merit and made him holy. Then Paul says,

I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes,

everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ.

Paul is like, *Listen, if there was a gold medal for being the most holy by the letter of the law, I'm the Simone Biles of religion. But all those accolades mean squat now.* Actually, he doesn't say "squat." Paul, like me, tends to be a little dramatic to make a point. (And at times, he loves to use a well-placed profanity to really drive the point home.) In verse 8 when Paul says he considers his old religious ways to be garbage, the original Greek word there is *skybalon*. (You say it like if Scuba Steve moonlighted with the CCM band Avalon to sing "Testify to Love": Scuba-lon.) Even better than that well-crafted pronunciation tip is what *skybalon* means: animal excrement. Rubbish. Dregs. Scum. Waste.

(Yes, this is still the story of my first sermon and, no, it somehow wasn't my last.)

These are strong words from Paul. He wasn't just like, *I mean, you know, I'm doing things a little differently these days.* My man said, *Compared to the freedom I've found in an intimate relationship with Jesus, literally everything I used to do is bull-skybalon.* You don't grow in spiritual maturity by knowing all the answers. You become a real follower of Jesus when you're willing to hold the tension of what used to demand your obedience and the freedom God is calling you forward to instead.

## Real-Life Tensions

Maybe, like Paul, you have a clear distinction between who you were before and after meeting Jesus. Maybe you know the day or



the year or your life is marked with a BC and AD timeline. Maybe you have a spiritual birthday and your story is a testament to how God can truly change a life. Or maybe, like I did for a long time, you count your story out because you don't have that decision point. Maybe, like me, you were basically born into a church pew with a hymnal in hand so you convinced yourself your story isn't worth telling.

The thing is, though, the tension doesn't exist only between two extremes. Often the tension of trying to follow Jesus is about an old and new way of living the same life. What matters most isn't knowing about God through Jesus; it's knowing Jesus in an intimate, personal way. It's moving away from hand-me-down beliefs of a God who "lives in heaven" to knowing Jesus whose whole mission is based on his love for you in the here and now.

Maybe your tension lies in understanding the simple fact that everything you believe—about yourself, about others, about the world, about religion—is a choice. And that you have the power to change it and make another choice. If God the Father doesn't change and Jesus doesn't change and the Holy Spirit doesn't change and the truth doesn't change, then what does? It has to be us. And believe it or not, God wants us to change. What are spiritual transformation and sanctification and becoming more like Christ if they're not about change?

Scientifically, change is challenging, but it's not the impossible feat Religious Certainty would have us believe. If you take the same route every day through a field, over time your footprints create a path. The same thing happens in your brain. As you think the same thought, whether it's true or not, you create a neural pathway. If you wanted to create a new path in the grass, what would you do? You would turn and walk in a different direction. Just as the original path took time to materialize, so will the new path. It also takes

time for the original path to fill back in and disappear. When this happens with our thoughts and beliefs, it's called neuroplasticity, and it's a way to rewire the brain. We can change the way we think and learn to move on from beliefs that no longer suit us over time.

## **Beyond Black and White**

Do you ever wonder what happens to Dorothy after she wakes up and realizes that the Emerald City and Munchkinland were all a dream? Sure, she'd lived happily in that one-dimensional black-and-white world her whole life. It was all she knew. But after seeing a world in Technicolor? After having her mind opened to the possibility of more? After learning to think for herself about who she was, how other people became who they were, and what might be motivating authority figures to lead the way they did? How can someone go back after their eyes have been opened to all of that? I don't think I could.

Just as Paul had scales fall from his eyes, once you start to see who God really is, you can't unsee it. I know it can feel like a dream (or a nightmare) to look around and see things differently. But on the other side of certainty, there is a life of freedom. It's vibrant and colorful and contains mysteries you've never thought could exist. And just maybe, what frightens us doesn't hold as much power as we think.

Throughout the rest of this book, we're going to unlearn a faith that was built on Religious Certainty so we can relearn a new way forward in faithful curiosity. If you find yourself on that old path, going back to a belief or solution that worked in the past, it doesn't mean you're stuck there. Comfort is alluring and the devil you know feels safer than the devil you don't, even when you know it's not good for you. Discomfort is inevitable, but as you learn to embrace the tension, you will see that it's been the doorway to freedom the whole time.

## SIT WITH THIS

### What's Coming Down?

- What are the questions that won't let go of you? Where do you feel the tension of things you are trying to hold together that no longer fit easily?
- What is frustrating you about Christianity or the Church in this season? Write it all down to evaluate later.
- Is there anything you previously believed or lived out that you're loosening your grip on or releasing altogether? What does it feel like to let go? What could God be inviting you into in its absence?

### What Still Holds?

All through Scripture we have reminders that we are not alone in our wrestling. Reflect on these passages depicting the tension between rigid religion and the life Jesus is inviting you into:

- ***Jesus and the Pharisees.*** Matthew 12:1-14; 23:1-38; Mark 7:1-13; John 8:1-11; 9:13-34
- ***Jesus disrupting power in the temple.*** Luke 19:45-48
- ***Questioning and testing of Jesus.*** Mark 8:11-21; Luke 18:9-14

We also see transformation that comes from surrender, not certainty. Notice what feels true as you read:

- ***The Saul/Paul transformation.*** Acts 9
- ***Paul's naming what he once held tightly to.*** Philippians 3:1-9

### Where the Walls Give Way

Choose an aspect of your faith where you feel you haven't looked at the full picture. What questions have you been afraid to ask? What voices or ideas were you steered away from? Consider additional resources like these as you learn more about how to approach faith with humility and curiosity:

*All Things Reconsidered* by Knox McCoy

*Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* by Eugene H. Peterson

*Faith After Doubt* by Brian D. McLaren

*I've Got Questions* by Erin Moon

*Learning to Be* by Juanita Campbell Rasmus

*Life of the Beloved* by Henri J. M. Nouwen

*Orphaned Believers* by Sara Billups

*Out of Sorts* by Sarah Bessey

*Simply Jesus* by N. T. Wright

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