

Navigating My Crisis Of Faith

When a preacher takes command of the pulpit, it's for the purpose of *preaching* the word. A spiritual topic is explained or a biblical text analyzed in an effort to nurture the faith of those in attendance. After all, "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." But this evening, I'd like to do something a bit different...and when I say "different," I do not mean to imply that I'll be leaving the Word out of it. Just as Paul, in Acts 22, Acts 23 and Philippians 3 related *his* personal story and experiences in an effort to illuminate key spiritual truths and direct people to a deeper faith in Christ, I'd like to share with you key events from my life in the hope that my story will help you in some way.

Specifically, I'd like to focus on a period in my life that occurred fairly recently. On a few occasions, I've alluded to my "crisis of faith" or my "spiritual crisis." This was the darkest and most terrifying *low* that I have ever experienced as a Christian. I will tell you here at the beginning that I found myself on the brink of unbelief. My doubts and struggles during that time were so severe and unrelenting that I felt that it was only a matter of time before I abandoned the church altogether. That's how serious this was, and tonight, I'd like to share with you, from beginning to end, how I navigated this "crisis of faith" and how, after all is said and done, my faith is so much stronger now than it ever was before.

It's not going to be easy for me to share these things with you. I tend to be a very private person. As an introvert, I absolutely do *not* wear my innermost feelings on my sleeve. It's difficult for any of us, I believe, to make ourselves vulnerable. But more than that, I cannot help but feel embarrassed and ashamed, as if I should never have let this "crisis of faith" happen, as if I should have been strong enough to handle anything. After all, I'm a preacher, and I should consistently exemplify strength and faithfulness. As James 3:1 says, "Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment." And in 1 Timothy 4:12, I'm instructed to "be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity." This "crisis of faith" shouldn't have happened, not to me. At least, that's how I felt at the time.

So why am I sharing my story with you tonight? Because it has become clear to me that I am not the only believer who has experienced these feelings or who has questioned his faith. I'm not the only one who has felt utterly alone in his doubts. Even if you *haven't* been there, it's safe to say that some of you will probably be there at some point in the future, and it's a morbidly uncomfortable place to be.

My lesson is intended to remind you that you are *not* alone, but more importantly, that there is a way to work through these doubts and fears. I want to address the mental anguish that is associated with such spiritual crises and address it from both a psychological and biblical perspective.

I'll try not to let my emotions get the best of me, but please bear with me if they do. With that being said, I'd like to start at the beginning...

In 2012, I moved from the “Bible Belt” to live and preach here in Sparks. At that point, I had been active in *Christendom* for about 13 years but had been living as a faithful Christian and preaching the gospel for about eight years. I had studied the differences between evolution and creation, was familiar with the prophecies in Scripture, and knew of strong evidences for the Christian faith, but I had always operated under the assumption that the core foundations of the Christian message are true – that there is a God, that He sent His Son to die for our sins, and that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God.” I had talked briefly with a handful of atheists and skeptics over the years, but had never really been exposed to “the other side.”

Not long after I moved to Sparks, I started *tabling* at the University of Nevada, and for the first time in over 13 years, I really encountered “the other side.” It all started one day when a member of the Secular Student Alliance walked up to my table and asserted that the Bible cannot be true because there are contradictions between the creation account of Genesis 1 and the creation account of Genesis 2. She was very adamant about this. I simply opened my Bible, explained Genesis 2 to her, and showed her why there were actually no contradictions at all. Her demeanor changed immediately and I remember her saying to a fellow atheist, “Hey, this guy actually gave a good explanation of this.”

Other members of the Secular Student Alliance (as well as independent atheists and skeptics) came up to my table as the semester progressed. We would discuss and even debate the merits of evolution, the details of the biblical creation account, the nature of morality, the character of God, and a number of other hot-button issues. I think they were a bit excited to encounter a Christian that would actually discuss and reason through these questions with them in a logical way.

As I befriended many of the SSA members, they began inviting me to their bimonthly discussion groups which met on Tuesday nights from 6:00-8:00. Certain members from the church here went with me at various times, but usually I was the only Christian there. And our debates were epic. I remember one discussion on the topic of ‘hell’ that was particularly fiery. *Get it?*

In addition to the discussions we had when I tabled and the bimonthly SSA meetings, I was also meeting a few of these guys for coffee on occasion to discuss these same issues, one on one. I did a series of weekly podcasts with two *other* atheists who were NOT members of the SSA – those podcasts are on YouTube, I believe. I was debating these same issues online *daily* in a Facebook group that I started called “Apologetics Anonymous.” And then, of course, there was the debate I did last September at UNR with my friend, Ben Drumm – again, that video is on YouTube as well as the church-website. So needless to say, my “work” with the atheists became a MAJOR focus in my life. I saw it as my mission field. These people wanted to hear a Christian perspective; they were asking me to share with them the teachings of the Bible...and I felt that God was calling me to be there, to help them, to answer their questions...and my daily hope and prayer was that God would open their hearts. “With God, all things are possible,” right?

In regard to all these debate topics – evolution, alleged Bible contradictions, morality, the character of God, hell – again, these were issues that I had studied before and had even considered from a defensive position. I knew that atheists viewed God, especially the God of the Old Testament, as a hateful, vindictive bully. I knew that atheists viewed the concept of eternal hell as unjust. I knew the difference between secular morality (which is rooted in relativism and subjectivity) and biblical morality (which is absolute and objective). But because I had always interacted primarily with Christians, my understanding of all these issues was mostly one-sided. Now, with the SSA and my other atheist friends, I was hearing questions that I had never heard before and seeing angles and perspectives to issues – even biblical texts – that were brand new to me. Not only did I relish the opportunities to share the Scriptures with these people, their questions and angles helped me to develop a much deeper understanding of my faith. I enjoyed being challenged, because in my mind, that meant that I was growing, too. *And I did grow. I did benefit from those discussions.* Remember, truth doesn't fear honest investigation!

For a while, I was able to keep my focus; my faith remained strong and my zeal for God didn't waver. But that began to change in the fall of last year.

I believe there were two factors that contributed to my “crisis of faith.”

1. From mid-July to late-September, I spent almost every waking hour preparing for my debate with Ben. I woke up early to study vestigial organs and stayed up late to study the supposed evolution of whales. And this was on top of all of my other work – my sermons, my Bible classes, preparing material, having studies. When the debate ended, I was burned out; I was mentally drained from having expended all of my energy; I was weak...like a runner after a marathon or a soldier after a hard-fought battle. And because I was weak and broken down, I was vulnerable.
2. I had spent so much time all year debating my atheist friends that their rhetoric started to take root in my mind. All of their comments about the injustice of hell, the cruelty of God, the supposed inaccuracies and absurdity of the Bible, just cycled through my mind over and over and over again. And in my weakened, vulnerable state of mind, I started to wonder...*what if?* At this point, none of these questions gave me serious doubt, but the way was paved for skepticism and unbelief.

In 1 Corinthians 15:33, we're told that bad company corrupts good morals. Of course, it's always good to reach out to people. Jesus ate with the tax collectors and sinners. Paul spent time in the idolatrous city of Athens wrangling with the pagans. But too much exposure to negative thinking, to skepticism, to worldliness, is bound to affect even the strongest among us. Even from a secular perspective, if you spend too much time with cynics, you're bound to become cynical; if you spend too much time with people who are always depressed, you're bound to develop some negative thinking. Even Jesus made it a point to spend quality and quantity time with His disciples, and even Jesus made time – a lot of time – to pray in solitude. To be clear, it's not that we're to avoid interacting with the world, but we do have to guard our hearts, use wisdom, and do all that we can to offset the effects of the world by focusing on spiritual things.

And again, this is true *in principle* for everyone, including atheists. Take away their atheist groups and organizations. Take away Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and the other new atheist leaders. Take away all of the pro-evolution and anti-religion YouTube videos and websites. Then, once you've stripped them of all their church, preacher and Bible equivalents, once it's just them and their independent thoughts, throw in a few sermons and religious texts and Christian voices. I can almost guarantee you that some of *their* thinking will change or at least be challenged.

So it's not that the questions and doubts I developed were due to my being freed from the protective bubble of religious cultism, nor was it my sudden exposure to so-called rational thought. As I explained before, it was information overload on an already overheated and overworked system.

The droning voices of skeptics were so constant and so unyielding that I found myself developing real questions about my Christian faith by the onset of winter. It didn't help matters that I was so busy with my work – especially in preparing class material for the high school class – that I didn't make time to reinforce my faith through prayer and Bible study. I was on empty and the best I could do at the time was go through the motions of my work and obligations. My faith spiraled downward as my doubts ramped up.

The Bible tells us that Satan is our adversary. In 1 Peter 5:8, we're told that he walks about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. But his tactics are not always overt. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 11:3 wrote, "But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." In other words, Satan knows what he's doing; he's been doing it for a long time. To discourage us and lure us away from the light of God's fellowship, he's not necessarily going to throw adultery at us; he's going to slowly weaken our resolve with marital problems, with lust, and perhaps pornography. In my case, Satan was very patient. He waited till I was at my weakest point, then weakened my defenses by throwing a multitude of doubts and questions my way. Then he used only one question – one difficult question – to send me sprawling to the mat. It wasn't a question about some peripheral issue; it was a question that struck at the very heart of my Christian faith...a question that threatened to undermine everything I believed in. And to make matters worse, it was a question that, in many respects, could not and cannot be fully answered. Again, Satan's good at what he does.

Now, I'm sure you're dying to hear what the issue was that caused me so much consternation. Well...I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not going to tell you because (1) it's a difficult and sensitive issue, (2) it would take a lot of time to explain the issue as well as how I worked through it, (3) it's not necessary to the overall point of this lesson, and (4) I don't want it to detract from my main point. What I will say is that my question had to do with the history of Christianity and how to reconcile certain truths about the kingdom of God with the history of the church. I'll also say that I resolved the issue in my own mind through intense study of God's word. As a result, I preached a number of sermons on the grace of God. Many of you may remember those sermons.

But let me share with you how serious this was for me...

This question was so critical and my doubts so unrelenting that I found myself on the verge of unbelief. I remember thinking, "This is it! I've been wrong all these years. Christianity is a sham." I remember thinking about how this would affect my family, the church here, and my livelihood. I was plotting how best to work through this while hurting the least amount of people. It was to that point. It was all I could think about. I remember car rides where I would do nothing but beg God for help and guidance, where I would search desperately in my mind for an answer to my question, and where I would ponder all the different outcomes. At times, I cried. But more than anything, I felt empty and despondent.

I want to clarify that I never doubted the existence of God; I knew that this world couldn't be the result of chance, and not once did I think that *evolution* was the answer (it continues to baffle me that so many intelligent people believe so strongly in Darwinian evolution). If anything, I was on the verge of **deism**, not atheism. My doubts and questions were not directed at God or Creation, but at Christianity itself. But that didn't matter because the fact is, becoming a deist would have been as devastating as becoming an atheist.

My mental anguish was excruciating. I felt weak, and worst of all, I felt utterly and completely alone. I didn't talk to the elders; I didn't even talk to my own wife about this because I was deeply ashamed. *This shouldn't have happened to me. Of all people, I shouldn't be having these doubts.* But more than that, I dreaded their reaction. I didn't think they'd understand what I was going through. I didn't think they'd be able to see it and understand it from my perspective. I knew that it would overwhelm and frighten them. How would the elders react if the preacher came to them and confessed that he was on the verge of unbelief? They're the shepherds of this church. I didn't want to put that on their plate if I didn't have to. And how would my wife react if her spiritual leader lost his spirituality? What about my six children? The very thought of confusing them and letting them down only exacerbated my mental anguish.

And if I'm honest, pride was an issue. I didn't want to appear weak to people who expected me to be strong. I didn't think I needed anyone to guide me through this; I felt that I needed to handle this on my own. I didn't want people praying with me and telling me to trust God. I wanted to work through this logically and rationally, and in my pride, I didn't think that anyone would or could.

So I kept it to myself.

You see, my decision wouldn't only have affected me; it would've affected my family, my church, and all of the good Christian people I had drawn close to over the years. It would be a bombshell announcement. It would circulate throughout much of the brotherhood. There would be no hiding from it. So perhaps you can imagine the burden of responsibility I felt. The guilt was out of this world. And I felt alone in it all because I was too afraid and too proud to say anything to anyone.

I want to be very clear about something at this point. I was wrong to keep this to myself. I should have told my wife first and foremost. In 1 Peter 3:7, Peter tells me that my wife and I are heirs *together* in the grace of life. It was wrong of me not to open up to her and to allow her wisdom and grace to aid me in my time of need. And then I should have told the elders. They are, after all, my shepherds. James 5:14 says, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church.” Brethren, I was spiritually sick, and the elders are appointed by God to help those of us who are sick. I didn’t allow them to bear my burdens. I didn’t confess my faults to them. I didn’t seek their counsel. Proverbs 24:6 says that in the multitude of counselors there is safety. So again, let me be clear: I was wrong to isolate myself. I ignored the wisdom of God. I made matters worse. Sharing my doubts would not have been easy, but it would have been the right thing to do. Likewise, if you’re struggling with something, talk to someone in the church; go to the elders. Seek help.

Alright, so up to this point in my story, I’ve done very little right. I overextended myself. I surrounded myself with too much skepticism and negative thinking. I neglected my own personal spiritual growth. I isolated myself. And so because of a series of bad judgments on my part, I put myself on spiritual life-support and was on the verge of causing a whole lot of collateral damage.

That being said, I did work through it. It was a lot harder than it needed to be, and it probably took a lot longer than it should have...but through a lot of personal reflection, pouring my heart out to God in prayer, and studying the Bible, I slowly but surely emerged from the darkness.

So often what happens in situations like this is that we allow the things we don’t know to distract us from the things we do know. During my “crisis of faith,” I allowed the most difficult questions – the mysteries of God’s plan and purpose – to take center stage. The one thing that I just couldn’t bring myself to understand *at the time* became a deal-breaker for me...and that’s neither logical nor fair.

Think of it in terms of marriage. When you’re married to someone, you love them, you have memories together, and you’re best friends. Your relationship with your spouse can’t be reduced to just one thing; it’s like a 1,000 piece puzzle that you’re piecing together day by day. Now imagine coming across one puzzle piece that doesn’t seem to fit – one argument or disagreement – and allowing that one thing to define everything.

As I worked through my “crisis of faith,” I had to stop, take a deep breath, and remind myself of what I knew to be true:

- I knew that there is a God. David put it best in Psalm 19:1 when he wrote, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.” I couldn’t escape the **undeniable** fact that there is a God; His majesty is everywhere.
- I knew that the Bible provides the very best explanation of what I observe in the world around me. Mankind is special. We have dominion over the earth. We have a moral compass, as Romans 2 says. *The alternative of brute materialism and*

Darwinian evolution fail miserably at explaining these things. The Bible explains so succinctly what I observe about the world and the human experience.

- I knew that the Bible is a transformative collection of writings that has impacted me over the years more than anything else. It's honesty. It's intrinsic beauty. It's comprehensive address of the human condition – temptation, love, relationships, morality, hope and purpose. Again, Psalm 19 says in verses 7-10, “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.” And Hebrews 4:12 says that the word of God is living and powerful; I've seen and felt the pages of the Bible come to life. So even though I didn't understand certain things, I kept coming back to this.
- And finally, I knew that the prophecies in Scripture – especially those in Isaiah and Daniel – only made sense in light of divine inspiration. There was/is just too much evidence to ignore.

So what did I know? I knew that there is a God, that there is a higher purpose, and I knew that the Bible is inspired by God. Now...if these three things are true...then it is true that Jesus Christ died for my sins and that the message of Christianity rings true.

When I set aside my concerns and focused on what I knew, I was able to find my footing. Now, it was no longer a question of whether Christianity and the Bible were valid. And *that* had been the storm cloud looming over me and threatening to carry me “somewhere over the rainbow” to a strange new world. Once I unloaded this incredible weight that had been bearing down on me, threatening to crush me, I could now deal with the issue that had been plaguing me. Now I knew that either there was an answer, and I would find it, or that there wasn't an answer and I just needed to trust God. And if the latter was true, that was okay with me. Not ideal, but okay.

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God.” (Deut. 29:29)

“Lord. My heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor with things too profound for me.” (Psalm 131:1)

Romans 2:16 refers to “the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to” Paul's gospel.

And again, Romans 11:33 says, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out.”

There are going to be some things that we don't understand. I get questions all the time along these lines. *Where did God come from? Can God create a rock that's too big for Him*

to lift? How could Jesus be 100% human and 100% divine? You get the idea. And when these questions come up, it's okay to say, "I don't know." But these things don't change what I do know, and because I know that there is a God and that He is wise beyond anything I can comprehend, I'm willing to trust Him on these "unknowables."

At this point, atheists are going to accuse me of falling back on "blind faith." I can't tell you how many times I've heard atheists tell me that religion discourages honest inquiry and investigation, that religion is the antithesis to science and reason. An atheist is going to say that I was heading in the right direction when I questioned my faith, and that my return to faith was nothing more than a copout and a compromise of my newfound intellectual honesty. I disagree. I struggled and reasoned through all of this and settled on what I believed – and what I *believe* – to be the truth. But more than that – and this is very important, so pay close attention – for all of us, including atheists, (1) there is a limit to what we can know, and (2) there are a lot of important things that we don't know, and maybe can't know. Does the atheist know how everything happened in history, how everything works now, and how things will work out in the future? Not even close! If we allow the mysteries of the world to overwhelm our thinking, we're ALL going to go crazy. So we have to fall back on what we know and work from there. Does that involve a degree of faith? Absolutely. All people have a degree of faith. It's not a copout; it's unavoidable.

Once I was humbled by this fact and returned to my foundations, I was able to deal with the issue that was causing me so much doubt and frustration. I studied the Bible and found the answer. As it turned out, the problem wasn't with God or His word; the problem was with me and my failure to properly understand His word up to that point. When I understood this, the storm passed, the waves abated, and I could exhale.

It's been a few months since my "crisis of faith." I'll admit to you that even after my question was answered, it took me some time to regain my full focus and zeal for God. There wasn't a magical, feel-good moment where everything clicked and I was again seated in the heavenly places, basking in the radiance of God's glory. My very active imagination still wanted to play the "what if *this*" and "what if *that*" game even though I knew the answers and had confidence in my foundations. I still felt battle-weary and a little reluctant to climb back in the saddle and wave the banner of the cross. But at least the smoke had cleared and I had a sense of direction.

It was around that time that I gave the invitation that many of you may recall in which I alluded to my "crisis of faith." By that point, I had shared some of my concerns with others and no longer felt alone. And since then, my faith has only grown. In fact, I feel stronger and more confident now than I ever have. James 3:2-3 says, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience." All I can say to James' remarks here is "amen!"

As I bring this lesson to a close, I'd like to quickly recap the key lessons that I learned and that I think we'd all do well to remember:

1. It's not unusual *or wrong* to have questions and even doubts about the foundations of your faith. In fact, all those who think deeply about their faith and have a hunger for truth are bound to have doubts at some point. If/when these doubts arise in your mind, don't act rashly. Be patient.
2. Do not allow the business of life to keep you from developing your faith. If you do not MAKE the time to pray and to study, you WILL grow weak. We're bombarded with so much skepticism and negative thinking on a daily basis, and to counter that, we have to actively choose to nourish our spirits. Philippians 4:6-8 says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever things are noble...just...pure...lovely...of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things."
3. If you're struggling, don't keep it to yourself. Confess your struggles to the elders. That's why they're here, to shepherd us. If not them, seek the help of a mature Christian individual. But don't try to fight these battles alone. Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up."
4. It's noble to seek truth and understanding – after all, we're told to love the Lord our God with all our minds – but also accept the inevitability of faith. Faith is not something to be ashamed of; it's an HONEST and incredibly rewarding way of life that will strengthen and comfort us as we grow. "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland." (Hebrews 11:13-14)

In the end, I can only echo the words of Job, who after navigating his own "crisis of faith," answered the Lord and said:

"I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; You said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.' I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

It's hard for me to read these words and not get emotional...because I can relate; those are my words as much as they are Job's. Rather than allow the things we don't understand to wreck our faith; they should humble us before God. What an amazing God we serve!

And to think that in spite of our constant doubting and disbelieving, our weaknesses, our frailties, and our downright sinful behavior, the God of this universe loved us enough – He loved me enough – to send His perfect Son, Jesus, to die on a Roman cross for our sins.

“In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.” (1 John 4:7-15)

Brethren and friends, our faith is predicated *on* and nurtured *by* the love of God which has been poured out through Jesus Christ. We can't see God. We can't hear His voice. There are a lot of things we don't understand. But God's love *is* real. It can be understood and felt and experienced. And if you haven't confessed your faith in Christ; if you haven't put your trust in Him, you can do so this evening and begin your journey of faith. It won't always be easy, but I can promise you that there is nothing more rewarding.

If there is anything that we can do to help you draw nearer to God this evening, please let us know while we stand and sing the invitation song.