



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas
That Hijack Faith And
How to See Beyond Them

DARRELL SMITH

STUDY GUIDE

FAITH LIES
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How to See Beyond Them
STUDY GUIDE

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018952583

ISBN 978-1-595557322 (Paperback)
ISBN 978-1-595558589 (Hardbound)
ISBN 978-1-595557308 (eBook)



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION ONE DIALOGUE GUIDE: THE DISARMING AND INTRODUCTION

Handouts:

- “Rolling Communal Midrash”
- “The Disarming” (pp. 1-3 of Faith Lies)
- “Introduction Excerpt” (pp. 5-8 of Faith Lies)
- “A Small Tragic Example” (pp. 14-16 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence – Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Parchment Scrolls

Participants are invited to claim a blank parchment scroll from the basket—as the basket is passed around. At each gathering, participants are encouraged to write one aspect, story, doctrine, idea, or belief with which they struggle on the scroll. In as few words as possible, participants will simply name the idea. For example, one could write:

- “Why is it important that Mary was a virgin?”
- “How could a loving God exclude so many people?”
- “The doctrine of original sin.”
- “I struggle to believe that a God even exists.”

At the end of each session—after participants have had a chance to write on a scroll, the scrolls will be rolled back up and placed back in the basket. Participants will not write their names or identify their particular scrolls in any way. As the sessions progress, participants will claim and add on to a different and anonymous scroll each week.

Journals

Participants are encouraged to bring and use a journal of some sort during the sessions to capture their thoughts and questions. Journals can be provided by the class leader(s) if desired.

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “Rolling Communal Midrash”

- What is my response to this passage?
- Which of the seven agreement statements do I find the most challenging?
 - Are there any with which I disagree or will struggle?

Following the dialogue around the practice of rolling communal midrash, the leader(s) light the candle as a symbol of the participants’ agreement and consent to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering.

HANDOUT: “The Disarming” (pp. 1-3 of Faith Lies)

Watch the “Introduction to Dogma” clip on YouTube before reading:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mj6TXGIT0A>

- What is my response to this passage? Am I disarmed or anxious?
 - What concerns do I have about the journey ahead?

HANDOUT: “Introduction Excerpt” (pp. 5-8 of Faith Lies)

Watch the “Has Anything You’ve Done...” clip on YouTube as prompted
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmOvfX8zHb8>

- What is a “faith lie”?
- How does it feel to consider the possibility that a “lifeline” to which we might cling might not actually be “tied-off”—that something we build our faith upon might be misplaced?

HANDOUT: “A Small, Tragic Example” (pp. 14-16 of Faith Lies)

- What is my response to the assertion that the unbaptized go to hell?
- What incomplete ideas do I see hijacking faith in my life...my church...my community?

TABLE / RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to choose one “faith lie” or incomplete idea with which they are currently struggling and write it on their parchment scroll. Leader(s) should allow 2-4 minutes for this exercise.

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer a blessing or benediction to the participants as the basket is passed around for the collection of the participants’ scrolls.

Extinguish the candle

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies “Chapter 1” pages 19 – 34.

FAITH LIES

Session One Handout

ROLLING COMMUNAL MIDRASH

While a *rolling communal midrash* could be succinctly defined as a progressive dialogue, each of the three carefully chosen words in this phrase illuminate important aspects of how we learn and how we are transformed—and what is the point of learning if it is not transformative?

ROLLING

Rolling implies movement, and movement is extremely important to learning. If education is static and stationary, we are more likely to observe and less likely to engage. To be clear, the movement implied in the “rolling” part of *rolling communal midrash* is not necessarily physical movement (although it does not preclude it). “Rolling” indicates that the direction of the educational dialogue is not static and stationary. Instead, the direction in which things “roll” are, in part, determined by the needs of those invested in the dialogue.

A rolling dialectic does not mean freeform or without structure. It does, however, point toward allowing the expressed educational wants and needs of the collective to inform and shape both the method and the direction of the educational dialogue. Just because the rote memorization and regurgitation of facts can be attained through a stationary instructor behind a podium talking at a stationary group of students seated in chairs does not mean it is the most effective or transformative form of education.

COMMUNAL

Communal is clearly understood as involving the whole and is most certainly interwoven with the “rolling” aspect of *rolling communal midrash*. In order for the dialogue to “roll,” it necessarily requires the involvement of others. Thus, education is not solely the responsibility of any teacher but the gathered. The human species is made for community. We come from community, we need community to survive, and our various communities need our input and effort. We require the support of others from the moment we draw our first breath. Accordingly, it stands to reason that we learn best in community. The communal aspect of learning looks less like an expert lecturing the silent and observant and more like a trusted and experienced guide leading a conversational exploration.

MIDRASH

Although the origins of the word “midrash” lay in Hebraic spirituality, the understanding it conveys should inform every aspect of our educational exploration. It is literally defined as the interpretive process of filling in the gaps. Midrash is wrestling with the questions that exist on the tips of our tongues. Wrestling might be the most important word in defining midrash. It represents a philosophy that believes we grow through tension and disruption—that if we will really dig in and wrestle, the struggle itself will illuminate and transform us.

In the ancient Indian parable of the blind men and an elephant, a group of blind men are asked to touch an elephant and describe what an elephant is like. As each man encounters a different aspect of the elephant—from the ears, to the tusks, to the tail—they offer differing descriptors. Each offering is valid and true, but each offering is also incomplete. Only when taken together—in rolling communal midrash—do the varying experiences of the elephant begin to come together to present a greater understanding of the whole.

In Rolling Communal Midrash, we create space for each other to show up—
bringing our unique gifts, testimonies, and experiences.

To encourage and preserve a free and safe rolling communal midrash:

- 1. I agree to practice and participate in companionship with myself and with others in our gatherings.**
- 2. I agree to share only and if I wish.**
- 3. I agree that, if I share, I will share from my own experience, my own walk, or my own thinking and feeling.**
- 4. I agree to speak respectfully of myself and of others.**
- 5. I agree to hear and consider the sharing of others. I will hold any internal agreement or disagreement I may experience as an invitation to explore my own journey rather than an opportunity to correct others.**
- 6. I agree to maintain confidentiality with all that is shared in our gatherings.**
- 7. I agree that my sharing can be interrupted by the leaders if there is a concern over time, content, or safety.**

FAITH LIES

Session One Handout

THE DISARMING

At the very beginning of Kevin Smith's satirical movie, *Dogma*, the writer and director many adore as Silent Bob offers this disclaimer on behalf of his production company, View Askew:

Disclaimer: 1) a renunciation of any claim to or connection with; 2) a disavowal; 3) a statement made to save one's own ass.

Though it'll go without saying ten minutes or so into these proceedings, View Askew would like to state that this film is—from start to finish—a work of comedic fantasy, not to be taken seriously. To insist that any of what follows is incendiary or inflammatory is to miss our intention and pass undue judgment; and passing judgment is reserved for God and God alone (this goes for you film critics, too ... just kidding).

So please—before you think about hurting someone over this trifle of a film, remember: even God has a sense of humor. Just look at the platypus. Thank you and enjoy the show.

P.S. We sincerely apologize to all platypus enthusiasts out there who are offended by that thoughtless comment about the platypi. We at View Askew respect the noble platypus, and it is not our intention to slight these stupid creatures in any way.

Thank you again and enjoy the show.¹

I'm not sure if reading that in a book is as funny as seeing it on the screen, but I hope that you are laughing—or at the very least, you are a little more disarmed than you were before reading it. While I clearly cannot disclaim as masterfully as Kevin Smith and the View Askew crew, that is really what I want us all to do here—be disarmed.

The explorative journey that follows in these pages may very well offend some trusted ideas and principles. Beliefs and thought processes may be challenged. You will be encouraged to be critically honest about the inherited stories and doctrines upon which your faith or spiritual life is built. You may find parts of this journey cause anger, fear, or frustration—most journeys worth taking do that at some point.

What I can promise you is that any struggle or discomfort you may encounter along the way will not be without meaning. This journey has a purpose, and that purpose is not to belittle faith or tear down God. Quite to the contrary, the purpose of this journey is to strengthen our faith and deepen our relationship with the driving force of the universe—the ultimate reality—what many of us call God. This journey should also place us in better relationship to one another. Like it or not, we don't do much of anything alone—we are in this together.

This is not a journey of answers. There will be no lines drawn in the sand. You will not be asked to adopt a belief or take a pledge. This is a journey of questions and conversation. This is an exploration that honors argument,

dialogue, and discovery. Regardless of where you end up in and through this journey, you are and will be safe. You will not need to be armed or have your guard up. Instead, you will need to be open to having your life—your thinking and way of seeing the spiritual world around you—agitated and disrupted. And that is really the point—to subject the seemingly concrete way in which we behold the ever-changing universe to a shake-up. Why should our understanding be stagnant and singular when the reality in which we live is dynamic and even mysterious at times?

There is a wise rabbi in my life who repeatedly reminds me that there is growth in the disruption. To that end, let us disarm and journey toward disruptive growth together.

Disarm: 1) to lay aside arms; 2) to give up or reduce the means of attack or defense; 3) plagiarizing Kevin Smith's writing in an attempt to get people to relax.

Though it'll go without saying one chapter or so into this book, I would like to state that this writing is—from start to finish—a documentation of my experience with faith. Neither this book nor I insist that my experience is the right experience or the only experience. Rather, I hope that the questioning of my experience will help you to question your own.

So please—before you think about hurling this book across the room, remember: God is not afraid of questions. If God were afraid of questions, do you really think that God would have created you? Seriously. Since you have been able to speak, have you ever gone a day in your life without asking a question? See?! Right there, I just asked like three questions in a row—and I wasn't even trying.

This is not to intimate that questions are a bad thing in any way. If you are a questioner, then welcome.

If you're not a questioner...why is that?

Another question! Brilliant!!

Thank you and let the questioning begin.²

¹Kevin Smith, *Dogma*, DVD, Directed by Kevin Smith (Culver City, CA: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 1999).

²My apologies to Kevin Smith and the fine people at View Askew for ripping off your brilliant disclaimer. Please remember that imitation is the highest form of flattery. I am not quite sure who said that, but I am sure happy to imitate them as well.

FAITH LIES

Session One Handout

INTRODUCTION EXCERPT

William Shakespeare's tragedy of Romeo and Juliet coined a number of famous phrases that still stick with us today. One such phrase happens in an exchange between the two star-crossed lovers from rival families. Juliet, lamenting that her Romeo bears the name of an enemy family, suggests that they drop their names, which, on the surface, seems to pose a problem. "What's in a name?" Juliet asks. "That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet..."³ In two lines, Shakespeare—via Juliet—nails this simple truth to the wall. What we call a thing doesn't really affect the characteristics of the thing or the impact it has upon us. Were we to call a rose an umbrella instead of calling it a rose, it would nevertheless still possess the characteristics of a rose. It would still look and smell like a rose. Calling a rose an umbrella would not enable it to keep us dry in the rain any more than it would prevent a rose from beautifying a garden or attracting a bee in search of pollen.

The same can be said of a lie. A lie is a lie no matter what we call it. A lie is an untrue, inaccurate, or incomplete statement or idea that misleads or deceives. With the power to conceal, limit, constrict, and imprison, lies can hurt people. And just like Juliet's rose, a lie doesn't change simply because we call it something else. We could call a lie doctrine ... or orthodox ... we could even call a lie biblical and that wouldn't prevent it from having the characteristics and impact of a lie. In the same way that a rose will fail to keep me dry in a storm even if I—and everyone around me—truly believe it is an umbrella, a lie will ultimately fail me even if I—and everyone around me—believe that it is true. The storm is an important part of that equation. It is often in the storms of life where we are truly able to separate those ideas and values that will help keep us afloat from those that will hasten our drowning. The harsh and complicated circumstances in which we find ourselves during the course of our lives are the storms that reveal the true value of the ideologies and theologies to which we cling. Far too often, we find ourselves struggling to stay afloat in rough waters, grasping and pulling at the lifelines we have been taught to hold on to, only to find out that those lines are not tied off. We pull and pull, hoping that the line will bring us back to something solid and safe, but sometimes it just does not. We learn the hard way that certain ideas and philosophies weren't actually tied to anything helpful. Lifelines that should bring us back to a boat, a dock, or even another person on dry land turn out to be just floating rope.

Learning that the lifeline is not actually a lifeline while you're trying not to drown is like pouring salt on a wound. The timing of the lesson feels horrible. Nevertheless, it is in such moments that we seem to be the most open to education—to receiving new information. It is as if we have come to the end of an untied lifeline, realized that it will not help us, released it and cried out, "Throw me another line!" We become very open in such moments.

An exchange between two characters in the movie American History X ends with a very important question. The exchange takes place in a prison hospital where Danny, a young skinhead whose violent and racist ways have landed him not only in prison but now in the recovery room of the hospital following a gang attack, is trying to determine why the ideologies and philosophies upon which he built his life aren't working. Dr. Sweeney—Danny's former principal and a black man—comes to visit him, and Danny is ashamed. As Danny lays on a gurney crying in pain and fear, Dr. Sweeney identifies with his situation.

Watch the YouTube clip:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmOvfX8zHb8>

Dr. Sweeney: There was a moment when I used to blame everything and everyone for all the pain and suffering and vile things that happened to me—that I saw happen to my people; blame everybody, blame white people, blame society, blame God.

I didn't get no answers because I was asking the wrong questions. You have to ask the right questions.

Danny: Like what?

Dr. Sweeney: Has anything you've done made your life better?⁴

Has anything you've done—any philosophy you've believed—any ideology you've espoused—made your life better? This is a hugely important question! This is the question we inevitably face when we pull on lifelines in the storm. Is this idea or value to which I am clinging helping me? Is the belief making my life any better?

As we undertake this journey together, this is the question to which we must return. Is this belief, this outlook, this idea, this theology making my life any better? Is it helpful? And if it's not helpful, then why am I holding on to it? Am I clinging to a lie because that is what is expected of me? Perhaps I hang on to unanchored lines because they represent a tradition—hundreds, if not thousands, of years old? Perhaps I cling to incomplete ideas and unhelpful narratives simply because I have never been offered better alternatives. I don't know about you, but if I find myself in a storm and I have to choose between an unanchored line or nothing, I will always choose the unanchored line. It's better than nothing, right? Maybe if I hang on to it, I will find something to which I can tie it off?

Maybe not. Maybe holding tightly to a line that is not tied off to anything solid actually prevents me from being able to grasp something helpful. Maybe it is not enough to come to the end of the rope; maybe when I do, I actually need to let go. Let me invite you to do just that. Let go. Loose your grasp on those lifelines to which you hold so tightly. You are safe. You don't have to permanently abandon anything to undertake this journey. If we get to the end and you have found nothing helpful along the way, so be it. You can pick back up the lines you know and go on with your life. The ideas, philosophies, and theologies with which you began this journey will be waiting for you at the end should you choose to hold on to them.

³ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Norton's Anthology. (Chicago: Hampton Publishers, 2004) 55-104.

⁴ David McKenna, *American History X*, DVD, Directed by Tony Kaye (Los Angeles, CA: New Line Home Entertainment, 1999).

FAITH LIES

Session One Handout

A SMALL, TRAGIC EXAMPLE

I have worked in the church for a large chunk of my life. In doing so, I have run into honest and loving people who held tightly to some of the most skewed and hurtful ideas. And don't let me point any fingers here—I have lived the same way. More often than not, those of us holding onto faith lies don't recognize them as such. We just have them because we believe we are supposed to. We have inherited them—picked them up along the way—and have been unreflective about what they really say about God or about us.

Let me give you an example. In the last year, I have had conversations with faithful people who sincerely believed that those who aren't baptized before their death are sent to hell. To be clear, there are a number of bad ideas at work in that statement, not the least of which is the idea that hell is someplace people are sent upon dying if they haven't checked the right boxes—but let that one sink in for a moment. Think about what such an idea really means. Babies who die during childbirth, people who are never exposed to the concept of baptism, the person on his or her way to be baptized who is killed in a car wreck—according to such an idea, these people go to hell.

What does such an idea say about God? What does such an idea say about us? I don't know about you, but that is not a God or a faith of which I want to be a part. If that's God, I'm out.

Friends, do not misunderstand me. I do not bring up this example to mock or distance us from those who hold such a belief. They are not crazy, and they are not to be dismissed or ridiculed. Somewhere along the line they picked up a bad narrative. Maybe it was warped when they inherited it from someone they trusted. Maybe it skewed along the way based on interpretation. Regardless of how this faith lie came to be planted, what is needed now is investigation and protest.

For these people, a narrative of a vengeful, scorekeeping God whose idea of justice is so small that the unbaptized must suffer eternal torment and separation has hijacked the narrative of a loving God who cares more for people than rules. Baptism—a religious ritual practiced by Christians, inherited from Jewish tradition of mikveh—is certainly found throughout the Bible and the Judeo-Christian faith tradition. It has been an important symbol and place of intersection with the divine for thousands of years. Yet, who made it a rule?

- And if it is a rule, is there a right way to do it?
- Is there a way to practice baptism that doesn't count?
- What about the person John the Baptist baptized right before Jesus—did his or her baptism count?
- Who decided that baptism is a saving ritual that serves as your ticket into heaven?
- Who decided that without it, you go to hell?
- For that matter, where and when are heaven and hell?
- Is the point of our existence really to check-off some spiritual boxes that allow us to get a pass someday to someplace else?
- Is that really what baptism was ever intended to be—an escape clause to paradise?

The reason I offer this example is to demonstrate how pervasive even the smallest bad idea can be in our lives. Whether they realized it or not, the people who shared with me that the unbaptized go to hell were making declarations about who God is and who we are. They were acquiescing and subjecting understanding to decontextualized interpretations—submitting to faith lies.

The point of view I would invite you to hold on to is that none of the lies we will explore together came about because someone or something set out to deceive us systematically. Instead, they are the resulting weeds that grew up amidst the fertile soil created by acquiescence, distance, and interpretation. And weeds, if left unchecked, can take over a garden and kill off that which was originally intended to grow. Weeds must be pulled from a garden so that the sunlight, nutrients, and water can get to the sustaining crops we need to thrive. Similarly, lies must be investigated, protested, and discarded in order to preserve the helpful and freeing relationship into which we are invited. When we leave such lies uninvestigated over a prolonged period of time, a strange thing begins to happen. A folktale—a surface-level forgery of the original spiritual depth our forebears sought to preserve and pass on—replaces our faith. Instead of an inclusive, freeing narrative of love and acceptance and mercy, we descend into an illogical collection of fairy-tales and ideas that rarely make sense and aren't always helpful.



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION TWO DIALOGUE GUIDE: THE BIBLE IS ONLY THE LITERAL WORD OF GOD – PART 1

Handouts:

- “Starting with the Bible” (pp. 19-21 of Faith Lies)
- “Fight, Flight, or Freeze” (pp. 25-28 of Faith Lies)
- “Two Important Ideas” (pp. 30-35 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence – Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

“We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone.”

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “Starting with the Bible” (pp. 19-21 of Faith Lies)

- How has your view of the Bible changed during your lifetime?
- Do the three truths about the Bible provide enough of a foundation or cover for the journey ahead...or is something missing?

HANDOUT: “Fight, Flight, or Freeze” (pp. 25-28 of Faith Lies)

- Are there any parts of the Bible you would prefer to cut out with a razor?
- Share any “Fight, Flight, or Freeze” experiences you have had with the Bible—or with others over the Bible?

HANDOUT: “Two Important Ideas” (pp. 30-35 of Faith Lies)

- If the creation of the Bible reflects a God-human partnership, what does that say about humans? What does it say about God?
 - How does it make you feel to know that it is impossible to “take your Bible straight”—that it has always been a collection of interpretations inviting your own interpretation?

TABLE / RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to read the contents of the scroll they have and either: Respond to one of the “faith lies” already on the scroll or Write about a completely different “faith lie” with which they are currently struggling. Leader(s) should allow 2-4 minutes for this exercise.

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer a blessing or benediction to the participants as the basket is passed around for the collection of the participants’ scrolls.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies “Chapter 1” pages 35 – 50.

FAITH LIES

Session Two Handout

STARTING WITH THE BIBLE

This may seem like a strange place to start, but if our goal is to come out from under the limiting lies of our faith, we must recognize that most of those misunderstandings begin in how we view, understand, and interpret the Bible. In fact, the work of removing lies from our faith necessarily involves the Bible. While it is not the only source of truth, it is a source with which we should constantly interact—and let me tell you, we humans have certainly interacted with the Bible! Millions of books have been written about the Bible. Each year, the Bible is the focus of movies, Discovery and History Channel specials, miniseries, debates, conferences, classes, essays, articles, and more sermons than we could ever count.

People who trace their faith to any part of the Judeo-Christian scriptures have literally been arguing about what the scriptures were since before they were even scriptures. In acknowledgment of that reality, let me be clear as to my purpose in confronting this lie. It is not my intention or belief that the argument should cease. The argument—that is, the thoughtful debate over the scriptures and wrestling with the text—is a good and necessary part of our faith whether we identify as Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or none of the above. If anything, the conversation about the Bible should continue to expand—exploring different ideas and hearing from different voices.

It is also necessary to state, without reservation, that it is not my desire to bring low the Bible. Quite to the contrary, I believe that we should pore over the Bible and pour our lives into its story. The collected texts that comprise the Bible convey transformative truths that are applicable to every human life. What actually decreases the power and relevance of the Bible is when we insist it is only one thing—the literal dictates of God. Nevertheless, the point of this chapter will not be to offer the one “correct” view of the Bible and how it should be understood. In truth, I don’t accept that there is one right way to understand the Bible. Rather, the point of exposing this lie is to remove the limitations we have placed on the Bible by declaring it to be only the literal word of God. If it were only the literal word of God, there would only be one way to understand it—literally.

I remember what it was like to have the curtain pulled back on the Bible. I realize that the peeling back of layers and seeming dissection of the Bible can cause anxiety and confusion. Accordingly, I invite you to hold on to these truths and trust that they will remain intact throughout our exploration.

- 1. The Bible is a gift of God through which God speaks to us.**
- 2. The Bible is full of truth and informs our lives.**
- 3. The Bible is of central importance to our faith.**

It is my hope that these truths will provide comfort and peace for our journey. I hope that you will trust that it is not my intention to denigrate the Bible in any way. My hope is that we will loosen our grasp on the Bible and thereby allow it to flourish in our lives and in our world. I have learned the hard way that a tight grip on the Bible—seeing it only as the literal dictates of God—is actually a primary source of its denigration.

FAITH LIES

Session Two Handout

FIGHT, FLIGHT, OR FREEZE

Have you ever heard of the Jefferson Bible? Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and the third president of the United States, created his own version of the Bible. Following his time in office, one of the things Jefferson did was use a razor to cut out the parts of the Bible he thought relevant and paste them into another book he titled, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*.⁵

Jefferson precisely removed the miracles of Jesus and anything deemed supernatural in order to create a concise collection of the teachings of Jesus. Before we all judge President Jefferson too harshly, let's take a look in the mirror. We do this. We omit the parts of the Bible that trouble us and cling to the parts that encourage us. The only difference between Jefferson and us is that we have neither the time, the patience, nor the discipline to sit down and actually make our own Bible. But the truth is that those of us who engage the Bible in any way have our self-published internal versions—they exist in our heads and our hearts.

There are issues and ideas represented in the Bible with which we passionately identify. In such cases, we find it advantageous—if not easy—to **fight** and treat the Bible as the literal word of God. We rail against abortion or capital punishment, declaring the biblical principle of life and quote, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the LORD" (Rom. 12:19).⁶

There are also occasions where we think what the Bible says doesn't apply to our life, our situation, or our time, and we therefore dismiss it as irrelevant or inapplicable. In such times, we disassemble the Bible—like Jefferson—and say, "This part of the Bible doesn't matter to me." I am beyond whatever it is trying to convey. During such instances, we have an amazing ability to **flee** and perform whatever mental gymnastics are needed to allow us to feel good about sidestepping troublesome scriptures.

Then, there are those times when we just don't have the foggiest idea what to think about the Bible. Even if we find ourselves surrounded by people who are certain they understand "the biblical perspective" on a particular issue, we just **freeze** and try to blend in—to remain unseen and unnoticed.

Fight, flight, or freeze—three sides of the same coin—each revealing that the Bible befuddles us. Perhaps the largest problem of fight, flight, and freeze is that none of those responses work all the time. There are things in the Bible that even the most devout "fighter" has trouble reconciling as literalism. Similarly, there are truths in the Bible from which we can never escape—they just keep coming back—those parts that you just have to deal with. Ironically, the response of freezing might be the most exhausting option we choose. Dodging and blending in—hoping that no one will notice us—takes a great deal of energy

So if we agree that none of the three responses work all the time, we must ask ourselves, "Is there a fourth option?" What is the healthy response to the Bible?

In a word, dialogue.

The Bible is a developing story—a continuing conversation between God and the people of God. If you are looking for a simple rule as to how we should respond to the Bible, the rule is we should respond with conversation—and as I am sure you have already deduced, conversation cannot happen alone—at least not

healthy conversation. If we find ourselves taking a stance on the Bible that terminates relationship or ends our conversation with each other or with God, we can be certain we have lost our way. It doesn't really matter if we lost our way by fighting for the acceptance of the Bible as literal, fleeing from the Bible as irrelevant, or freezing in uncertainty—each of those responses leads us away from God, other people, and therefore, away from truth.

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French and English* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2011).

⁶ Unless otherwise specified, the Scripture quotations contained herein are from *The New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All Rights Reserved.

FAITH LIES

Session Two Handout

TWO IMPORTANT IDEAS

1. The Bible is not one book. It is a collection of books.

The word Bible literally means library. This work is a library of books created over thousands of years by people from different tribes who lived in varying places. It is a library that contains stories, genealogies, prophecies, poetry, laments, songs, symbols, and letters between friends and to entire communities. The contents of this library were written, copied, selected, compiled, and preserved by human beings according to a common divine thread—that of God’s repeated intercession into human history toward a loving, inclusive, communal relationship between God and the people of God. In the case of Hebrew texts like Job, Exodus, and Genesis, the stories they contain were told and repeated for generations long before they were ever written down. Every step of the way—the text that we call the Bible—involved people. People told the stories. People wrote down the stories. People decided which stories would be preserved and canonized—meaning those books that would be considered Scripture and those that would not. This does not mean that God was not involved in the creation of what we call the Bible—quite to the contrary. God was at the center of it all. God was the reason the stories were being told. Don’t miss that. God was the reason. God is the central character. It was because of God’s interaction and relationship with people that they had stories to tell, to write down, and eventually to canonize. There is no question that without God doing all the things that God did, there would be no Bible.

The inescapable truth, however, is that there would also be no Bible were it not for people. Think about that for a moment. Without people, God would not have needed to do the things the Bible records. Without people, there would be no one to appreciate creation, no one for God to pursue and rescue, no one to tell the stories of what God had done, and certainly no one to write it all down and preserve it as Scripture.

While it may seem problematic to biblical literalism for people to be so important in the creation of the Bible, it is nonetheless brilliantly divine. This is totally the way of God. God desires relationship with us. God meets us where we are and invites us into the story. It makes perfect sense that God would invite people to tell the story. It makes sense that some of the words within the Bible will be considered “God’s words”—meaning those words that people discerned God as actually having communicated to them in one way or another. It also makes sense that some of the words of the Bible will be the words of people—not God—but the people. Does that make them less relevant or true? The people who chose to write them down and preserve them clearly didn’t think so.

2. There are no original transcripts of the biblical texts.

Here is a truth that the literalist in all of us can’t escape: every Bible verse we have ever read or heard has been an interpretation—every single one. Not once in my life have I heard or read the original text—nor have you. By definition, the words of the Bible simply cannot be the literal words of God because we do not have any original, signed copies. Every transcript we have found and used to create the different translations of the Bible is a reproduction. No biblical scholar or translator is working from an original. Even if they were, we have to remember that the stories of the Hebrew scriptures were initially preserved orally—that is, the stories were told out loud and handed down from generation to generation. The idea that there is one correct transcript somewhere that represents the true words of God is simply false.

The whole history of the Bible is one of interpretation. Those who first wrote down the stories their mothers and fathers told made interpretative choices about what they wrote down and how they wrote it. The Hebraic

rabbis and leaders who canonized the Hebrew scriptures made interpretative choices about which texts to include and which texts to exclude. The writers of the four Gospels made different interpretative choices about how to tell the story of Jesus—which is why we don't have four identical accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Paul, Peter, James, and John made interpretative choices in their letters based upon the people and circumstances to which they were writing. Christians have yet to agree upon which books should be included in the Bible, historically making interpretative choices of inclusion or exclusion.

The interpretation doesn't stop with the closing of the biblical canon, however. The stories of the Bible needed to leave the confines of the ancient languages in order to reach the ends of the earth. While there are no original copies of any of the biblical texts, there are very old copies in Hebrew and Greek—and even a few portions in Aramaic. Early in the history of the Christian faith, those texts were translated into Latin.

Every modern translation of the Bible—no matter what language—can be traced back to one of these early Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, or Latin texts. In spite of this common and ancient origin, there remains this inescapable truth: every time the stories of the Bible were told, retold, written, rewritten, or translated, interpretative choices were made.

Whether we realize it or not, when we picked up our first Bible, we were picking up a library that contained hundreds, if not thousands, of interpretative decisions made for us by someone else. By definition, it is impossible for us to “take our Bible straight” because we have never been offered or had access to a “straight” uninterpreted Bible.

To even further wear you out with this point, as soon as we began to read the Bible, we cannot help but make our own interpretive choices. We decide what parts of the stories resonate with us and why. We interpret the events represented. We are part of the process. Is all this interpretation a coincidence? Is the fact that there is not one definitive, original transcript of any Biblical text simply a result of God's absentmindedness? I don't think so.

The continual involvement of human beings in translating and interpreting the Bible again points to our divine partnership. None of our interpretive efforts, however, exclude God from the process or devalue the truth of the biblical stories. God can be and, I believe, has always been part of the interpretative process. In fact, I believe that God loves interpretation—as any artist or creator of things would. I believe that God desires that the stories of divine love and intercession into human history be told and received in different ways. Interpretation only limits the power of the Bible if we believe that the Bible is limited to literal truth and therefore above interpretation.



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION THREE DIALOGUE GUIDE: THE BIBLE IS ONLY THE LITERAL WORD OF GOD - PART 2

Handouts:

- "A Third Idea" (pp. 35-39 of Faith Lies)
- "Progressive Apprehension" (pp. 41-42 of Faith Lies)
- "Beneath the Surface" (pp. 48-49 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence - Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

"We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone."

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “A Third Idea” (pp. 35-39 of Faith Lies)

- Does understanding the Bible to be a library of Eastern or Jewish thought change anything for you?
- Which of the listed differences between the Eastern and Western worldviews do you find the most challenging?

HANDOUT: “Progressive Apprehension” (pp. 25-28 of Faith Lies)

- Can you think of any examples of progressive apprehension in your life?
 - What does progressive apprehension mean for us as students of the Bible—thousands of years removed from its stories?

HANDOUT: “Beneath the Surface” (pp. 48-49 of Faith Lies)

- How does questioning or criticizing the Bible make you feel?
 - Can you think of a time when the way you held the Bible affected the way you treated someone else?
Do you still feel the same way?

TABLE / RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to read the contents of the scroll they have and either: Respond to one of the “faith lies” already on the scroll or Write about a completely different “faith lie” with which they are currently struggling. Leader(s) should allow 2-4 minutes for this exercise.

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer a blessing or benediction to the participants as the basket is passed around for the collection of the participants’ scrolls.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies “Chapter 2” pages 51 – 64.

FAITH LIES

Session Three Handout

A THIRD IDEA

3. The Bible is a 94 percent–98 percent Jewish library.

Okay, I am being a little cheeky here with the math, but the gist is that at least 62 of the 66 books Christians call the Bible were written by Jewish people and therefore should be wrestled with in a Jewish context.

We cannot understand the Bible without understanding the context of the Jewish people, places, culture, and context from which it came. To ascribe any other context—let alone that of our modern, Western context—will invariably leave us confused and disoriented. By the way, “Western” in this sense refers to the fact that most of us English speakers have been influenced and shaped by the western or Greek school of thought (Hellenism) versus Eastern philosophies. Judaism—and the writings of the Bible—occur in an Eastern context. Here are just a few of the more obvious differences:

- Our Western approach makes a distinction between the secular world and the spiritual world. The Hebraic understanding is that nothing is secular—everything is spiritual.
- Our Western approach values individualism and leads to a me-centered outlook while the Hebraic philosophy values community and leads to a tribe- or family-centered outlook.
- We Westerners view time as points on a straight line, subdivided into neat periods or segments of history—think timelines (you know you love them.) Our timelines are neat, orderly, and reflect when we have done something important or something important has happened to us. Hebraic thought perceives time as cyclical and organized by what God has done
- Western thought is based on words. Hebraic thought is based on images.
- Western thought is based on precise categories, cause and effect, linear equations like $A + B = C$. Hebraic thought is much more messy and blurred—based on contextual and relational logic. Everything is related and connected.
- Western thought holds that the worth of people is determined by their material possessions and power. In Hebraic thought, the worth of people is determined by their familial relationships.

- Western thought sees faith as a blind leap, while Hebraic thought sees faith as knowledge-based and informed by one's experience. Faith simply is to a Hebrew. God has been, is now, and always will be ... it is just accepted. There is no blind leap because faith informs the entirety of existence.
- We Westerners view money, power, success, and victory as blessings in and of themselves. Hebraic understanding holds that none of the above is a blessing until it is shared with others—given away for the benefit of the community.
- Western thought holds that history should record facts objectively and chronologically. Hebraic thought sees history as an attempt to preserve significant truths in meaningful ways regardless of objective facts. This is especially important for us to remember as Westerners when we treat the Bible as though it is a history textbook. The Bible is not a history textbook. When we treat it as such, we end up confounded, confused, or corrupted.
- The Western mind believes that the truth is static and unchanging. Eastern or Hebraic thinking holds that the truth continues to develop as God leads one into deeper understanding.

This book that we call the Bible—the collection of works to which so many of us claim to build our lives upon—has a context. To be honest, it has many contexts—and why wouldn't it? Can you think of any other “book” that contains writings from people who are distanced by thousands of years, thousands of miles, different cultures, and different languages? Each story of the Bible has, at the very least, contexts of time, location, culture, and circumstance. In many cases, archaeologists and scholars have been able to piece together much of the ancient context for us to study and understand today. In some cases, the context remains cloudy. Even when all the contextual details cannot be grasped, we are better off approaching the text as a Hebrew would. The Bible is a collection of Hebraic works. When we examine it and attempt to understand it with our Western mindset, we not only make interpretative choices, but we also make poor interpretive choices.

FAITH LIES

Session Three Handout

PROGRESSIVE APPREHENSION

Think of a game or sport that you have played. If possible, consider a game or sport with a lot of rules or regulations, like chess or basketball. Do you remember the first time you tried it? Did it only take one explanation of the rules for you to completely grasp it? Or did you experience what is called progressive apprehension? Progressive apprehension simply means that as we progress, we apprehend or understand more and more. For example, I remember when my father was teaching me to play chess. There were so many rules. Each piece on the board moved in a different way and could only move in its specific way. Although my dad carefully walked me through all the rules, what stood out to me was the fact that the knights were on horses and that they moved in an “L” shape. Accordingly, my first few attempts at chess were all about the knights. I would move my knights around the board one L at a time until they were captured. That was the regulation that I could wrap my mind around. When awash in the “new” ideas and concepts of chess, I grabbed a hold of one idea that I understood and rode it into the ground. Overtime, I progressed. I was able to absorb more and more of the game and see the different pieces working together in harmony. Strategies began to emerge. There were complex offenses and defenses, gambits and techniques. Eventually, I could see more than just rules and regulations. I could see the artistry and beauty of the game. Chess may not be your game—but I am hopeful that however you apply this metaphor, you begin to consider progressive apprehension.

Every human being who has ever lived experiences progressive apprehension. We are all in the midst of progressive apprehension every day in numerous ways. My wife can surely attest to my progressive apprehension of her needs and of our relationship during the course of our marriage. My children could talk at length about my development as a parent—especially my two boys who got me as a neophyte father with no experience at all. Our education, our relationships, our occupations, our faith—every aspect of our life—reflects our progressive apprehension. If that is the case, can we also allow it to apply to the writings of the Bible?

The people who told, wrote, and preserved the stories of the Bible also lived with progressive apprehension. They developed through time and experience just like we do. Is it really that much of a stretch to assume that their stories are also subject to progressive apprehension? Have you ever completely changed your mind based on something you experienced? What if you had written down a story about something you understood or learned ten years ago—would you still agree with your conclusions today? Might your understanding have changed somewhat throughout the last ten years?

FAITH LIES

Session Three Handout

BENEATH THE SURFACE

To believe that the Bible is both a library of books and also more than just a library of books takes faith. You have to believe that there's something else going on in these pages, something just below the surface, something that unites all those writers writing over all those years and then all those people making all of those decisions about which of the things those writers wrote belong in the particular arrangement of writings we call the Bible.⁷

There is something just below the surface that unites all of the storytelling, writing, preserving, and interpretation. Consider that what lies beneath the surface is similar to the mass of an iceberg. Most of us are building our lives around the visible piece of the iceberg when we should get beneath the surface and behold the entirety of it all. What if, like an iceberg, 90 percent of the spirit and power of the Bible lies beneath the water—beneath that small “surface breaking” piece?

When we begin to take in the whole iceberg, we also begin to understand that the iceberg is not a random piece of ice adrift at sea. It is connected to a larger system that defines and shapes the entire environment. It helps align the world. If the icebergs melt, the climate will change and ultimately the earth's axis will change and life will be extinguished. Perhaps that is true of the Bible. Regardless of our interpretations of the small surface-breaking piece, more is going on. There is more beneath the surface—more for us to investigate and wrestle. And like the iceberg, the Bible is not a random book adrift in the abyss. It, too, is connected to a larger system—something Jesus called the Kingdom of God. To be sure, the Kingdom of God cannot be destroyed, but how we behold it and interact with it defines our reality, our existence—it, too, aligns our world.

Exposing the Bible to our questions and criticisms does not weaken it. Pursuing the context of the biblical stories does not demean them. Loosening the grasp of biblical literalism does not remove the power of the Scripture. On the contrary, these are the ways that we dive beneath the surface to behold more.

- The Bible is not a history book ... but there is history within.
- The Bible is not a rulebook ... but it does contain instructions for being free and fully alive.
- The Bible is not simply the literal word of God ... but God has chosen to partner with people to tell the literal story of God's love.

Our engagement—literal or otherwise—of the stories of the Bible have built and shattered nations, imprisoned and released millions, brought death and given life. We must deal honestly with the impact our understanding of the Bible can have. Do we position it in ways that end relationship and conversation—ways that lead to destruction, imprisonment, and death? Or do we hold it in ways that encourage relationship, start conversations, release the captives, and give life?

⁷ Rob Bell, What is the Bible? Part 11: How We Got It, robbell.com, accessed March 5, 2015, <http://robbellcom.tumblr.com/post/67479672681/what-is-the-bible-part-11>.



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION FOUR DIALOGUE GUIDE: GOD IS ANGRY AND DOESN'T LIKE ME—ESPECIALLY WHEN I SIN – PT. 1

Handouts:

- “A Convicted Button Pusher” (pp. 54-59 of Faith Lies)
- “The Half-Truth” (pp. 60-64 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence – Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

“We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone.”

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “A Convicted Button Pusher” (pp. 54-60 of Faith Lies)

Watch the “Dave Allen First Day of Catholic School” clip on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leEcUamCPSA>

- How do punitive substitutionary atonement and justification make you feel about Jesus?
How do they make you feel about God?
- As much as these ideas may resonate with your faith, do they feel like a complete representation or is something missing?

HANDOUT: “Progressive Apprehension” (pp. 25-28 of Faith Lies)

- How does recognizing “Jesus died for my sins” as one theory among many historical explanations of the crucifixion make you feel?
- What arises in you when you consider the possibility that sin might be our problem and not God’s problem?

TABLE / RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to read the contents of the scroll they have and either: Respond to one of the “faith lies” already on the scroll or Write about a completely different “faith lie” with which they are currently struggling. Leader(s) should allow 2-4 minutes for this exercise.

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer a blessing or benediction to the participants as the basket is passed around for the collection of the participants’ scrolls.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies
“Chapter 2” pages 65 – 86

FAITH LIES

Session Four Handout

A CONVICTED BUTTON PUSHER

Watch the YouTube clip:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leEcJamCPSA>

When I was five years old, I went on one of my father's business trips with my mother and older sister. One day while Dad was off at work, my mother took my sister and me to the swimming pool at the hotel where we were staying. Near the swimming pool was a covered patio with vending machines. It wasn't long before my sister and I were begging our mother for money to go get candy and soda. My mom gave us some change and returned to the book she was reading poolside. After my sister and I had spent what we were given, I continued to push the buttons on the candy vending machine—if for no other reason than because buttons are fun to push and you never know, you might get lucky. Well, we got lucky. The machine was broken and no matter what we pushed, it just kept spitting out candy. It was a dream come true for a couple of sugar junkies. Without missing a beat, we grabbed a hotel towel and began to load it up with our spoils.

We emptied the machine. I think the only thing we left in there were a couple of Almond Joy candy bars because neither of us liked our chocolate to be distracted by coconut—just give us the straight sugar. Later, when our mother took us back to our adjoining hotel rooms, my sister and I went into our room, spread the towel out on the bed, and began to divide and enjoy our treasure. Somewhere in there my mom happened by the adjoining doorway, saw the Costco-sized load of candy we were gorging ourselves upon, and the nougat hit the fan.

As she grilled us with questions of where the candy came from and what had we done, I slowly began to descend from my glistening sugar buzz and consider the possibility that we had done something wrong. Just as I was about to make a very logical argument about it not being our fault, I heard the words that came with a foreboding soundtrack and a pit in my stomach—"What will your father think?" My sister and I both panicked, "Wait! Mom, we don't have to tell Dad—we'll go put the candy back in the machine!" We knew that if she was bringing Dad into the situation, we must have really screwed up—and now we were going to get it.

I have no idea how much time passed between when Mom caught us and when Dad got back to the hotel, but I can tell you that it was an eternity to my sister and me. We sat and waited, doomed as convicted felons awaiting punishment with a pile of sweet, chocolate evidence between us. When Dad arrived, we could hear Mom in the next room telling him what we had done. With disappointment and restrained anger, he came in and questioned us for our version of the afternoon's events. When we had thoroughly allocuted to our crime, our father calmly instructed us to wrap the candy back up in the towel. He was way too calm for my liking. I was waiting for the boom to be lowered. Where was the yelling? What about our punishment? Don't leave me hanging—let's have it!

And then ... boom. Dad announced to us that we would be taking our spoils to the front desk where we were to confess our crime to the hotel staff and suggest that they call the police so that we could be punished for our thievery. Go ahead and sit in that for a moment as a five-year-old would—and don't miss that last bit because it's true. Dad told us we were to ask the desk clerk to have us arrested for stealing. All I could think was, I finally did it. I found the line that is too far for my parents. They're giving me up to the police.

Do you have this picture in your head? A five-year-old and an eight-year-old go up to the front desk of the hotel and unwrap a towelful of candy, confess to stealing it from the pool vending machine, apologize, and then suggest to the front desk clerk that she call the police to come and get us—all while my father stands behind us with his arms crossed. My sister may have been old enough to know they were not going to call the cops, but I was not. I was sure that I was going to jail. I had just confessed and handed over the incriminating evidence, for crying out loud!

The euphoric relief that washed over me when the desk clerk laughed and said, “That won’t be necessary,” was like nothing I had ever felt before. What? I am free?! I am not going to jail! I immediately knew that this woman was the coolest person I had ever met. How about that, Dad? I bet you weren’t planning on the desk clerk being so cool! Your plan to send us to prison has been foiled!

Of course, my father knew they would not call the police. Of course, my parents were just making sure that we learned a lesson that we would not forget. In hindsight, I can look back at that episode and see it as incredibly fair and effective parenting. My sister and I were not punished or grounded any further after we returned the candy. Neither of my parents ever raised a hand to us, but they did make sure that we realized our actions had consequences and that we met those consequences head-on. I don’t fault my parents one bit for how they handled it. In fact, I think it was quite brilliant.

Here’s the problem: I didn’t connect the dots. At five, I didn’t realize that my parents had just helped me understand that the behavior I choose will always have a consequence that I cannot escape. I didn’t grasp that I had truthfully displayed the normal five-year-old behavior to a candy machine that spits out candy. What I learned is that when a vending machine dispenses free candy, I am not supposed to take it. I am supposed to be stronger in the face of temptation. I thought I had messed up—that I had been weak when I should have been strong. I had pushed the buttons and I had taken the candy. I was a failure.

What my parents and the hotel clerk saw that I did not see was that I had behaved like any five-year-old would have. None of them actually expected me to act any differently than I had in that moment. Have you ever seen five-year-olds in the presence of a button—any button—that they did not push? Can you imagine a kid who would stop pushing the buttons on a vending machine that keeps giving out candy? Of course not! My parents knew that. The gracious desk clerk knew that. I didn’t know that. What I picked up was that I had made a mistake and that I deserved to be punished. I had stolen candy, and I deserved to go to jail. The only reason I had not gone to jail was because the woman behind the desk decided to have mercy on me.

For the longest time, this is exactly how I saw my relationship with God. I knew I was not living a sinless life. I frequently made selfish mistakes, hurt others, and did things that I should not do. If given an opportunity to steal some candy, I would take it. Therefore, I concluded that I was a sinner who deserved to be punished, and the only reason that I would not be punished is because someone decided to have mercy on me—Jesus. Just like the hotel clerk, Jesus would forgive me. That was the foundation of my faith; I was a candy thief who did not have the strength to stand up to temptation and Jesus was the gracious hotel clerk. I needed that clerk to forgive me because there was no way I could ever be worthy otherwise.

I had heard enough preachers and religious folks reference “judgment day” and the scriptures about judgment to have an unsettled feeling about what awaited me. I believed that if Jesus wasn’t standing with me on “judgment day,” I was going to prison. God was going to come settle accounts, and Jesus was going to defend me. It would be as if the clerk at the hotel who forgave my sister and me for pillaging the candy machine was going to stand next to us on the day we checked out of the hotel and stood before the hotel manager.

“So these are the two thieves who stole from me?” the manager would say. My sister and I would stand ashamed with our heads bowed. “Yes, sir,” the desk clerk would answer. “But I have forgiven them.” The manager would question, “You have? Then who is going to pay for the damage they have caused?” “I will,” the clerk would say. “I will take whatever punishment is necessary on their behalf.”

This act of the hotel clerk standing before the manager on our behalf is what theologians call punitive substitutionary atonement. The idea is that we sinners—by our misbehavior—have separated ourselves from God and must atone or make reparation for our wrongdoing. This theological belief holds that we deserve to be punished. Jesus stands before God as our substitute. He takes our place in atoning for our mistakes. Theologians who align with this thinking will point out that substitutionary atonement takes place frequently in the scriptures. For example, when Adam and Eve commit the “original” sin and become ashamed of their nakedness, God kills an animal to provide skins for their clothing (Gen. 3:21). During the pinnacle of the Exodus narrative, the Hebrews are commanded to kill a lamb and mark the doorposts of their homes with its blood so that the Spirit of God will know to “pass over” their homes as it travels through Egypt, killing the firstborn (Ex. 12:13). Throughout the times of the Tabernacle and the Temple in the Hebrew scriptures, God’s people are offering sacrifices of slaughtered animals, first fruits, and grains in order to get right with God. Christian theologians point out that all the preceding sacrifices are shadows of the ultimate atonement offered by Jesus on the cross.

If you are like me, there is something about punitive substitutionary atonement that you don’t want to question. In a way, my Christian upbringing has created in me an expectation for that story. I have been taught that whatever punishment I might deserve, Jesus stands between that punishment and me. That heroism draws me to Jesus—it makes me love him. Why would I want to question that? I am humbled that Jesus took the punishment for me just as I was humbled by the desk clerk who said, “It’s all right. It will not be necessary to call the police.”

I don’t want to question that Jesus atoned for my sins because I have been taught that it was Jesus’ actions that cause my release from punishment. Jesus is my merciful substitute. He erases my sins. Through his sacrifice, I become justified. “Justified to do what?” you might ask.

Justification is another theological concept that overlaps with substitutionary atonement. The basic idea behind justification is that the death and resurrection of Jesus justifies his followers before God. His righteousness is bequeathed upon his followers, and they become justified before the Lord. If my sister and I had really been required to stand before the hotel manager, it would have been the substitutionary atonement of the desk clerk that allowed us to stand before him or her blameless. We would have been justified because of the actions of the clerk. If the hotel manager or police showed up looking to punish us, we would have pointed to the clerk and said, “She said we were forgiven.” In essence, her mercy justified our moving on from our mistake and not being arrested. Similarly, we, as selfish and sinful people, are supposedly justified to have a relationship with a selfless and holy God because of Jesus’ sacrifice as our substitute.

Does this all sound about right? Do these concepts of substitutionary atonement and justification sum up any part of your understanding of Jesus and God? If so, you may be wondering, Then, where is the lie? That is a good question to ask.

FAITH LIES

Session Four Handout

THE HALF-TRUTH

There have been a few parenting moments in our home that sound like this:

Abby: Mommy, Sammy pushed me!

Mommy: Sammy, did you push Abby?

Sammy: Yes.

Mommy: Abby, why did he push you?

Abby: I don't know ... because he's mean?

Mommy: Sammy, why did you push Abby?

Sammy: Because she kept sitting on me and thumping me in the head.

Now I don't want to single out our daughter as being the only child who utilizes this technique. All of our children employ the self-promoting technique of the "half-truth." It is a fairly pedestrian method of lying that obscures the big picture in an effort to highlight the information one feels is more important. In the scenario above, it is much more important to our daughter Abby that we know how corrupt her older brother is and that he be punished. After all, she is the one who brought my wife into the altercation in the first place. All parenting skills aside, we do not accept the half-truth in our home. A half-truth is a lie. To be honest, a half-truth isn't a truth at all. It is a misrepresentation of the truth.

So what is the half-truth behind the lie that God is angry and doesn't like us when we sin? What incomplete representation has led millions of faithful people to the conclusion that their relationship with God is based on their ability to act right?

Jesus Christ died for my sins.

Now, take a deep breath and relax—we're all going to be okay. Remember, I am not saying that Jesus did not die for our sins; it's just not a complete idea. It represents a distorted picture upon which millions of people—including me—have based their lives. In fact, it is a half-truth so firmly grasped that it has led to war, devastation, and great loss of life.

Yeshua ben Yosef (Jesus son of Joseph) lived on earth for approximately thirty-three years. His dedicated and purposeful ministry lasted between one year and three years (depending on differing Gospel accounts). He loved. He healed. He helped. He taught. His disciple John concluded his Gospel account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection by saying, "There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." (John 21:25)

That is a bold statement. All the books of the world could not contain all that Jesus did? Then why in the world do we think we can contain Jesus in one sentence? In a very basic question, we must ask ourselves: was the whole point of Jesus' life to die for our sins? Is that really what he was all about? Was it all just so that we would be justified by Christ's *substitutionary atonement*?

Jesus did not seem to think so—at least, that is not the truth as presented in the Gospel accounts. Jesus loved “sinners.” I’m not talking about the reality that he had no choice because every human makes mistakes. I’m saying Jesus gave his time, energy, and love to flawed people—both the “down and out” and the “up and in”—the connected and the marginalized. Not once did Jesus have his disciples haul someone off for being an outsider, irreligious, or impure. Every time the crowds of religiously behaving people haul “sinners” before Jesus in the Gospel accounts, Jesus declares their sins forgiven.

What’s that about? If Jesus repeatedly declares the sinners that are dragged before him in the gospels as forgiven, why was the cross even necessary? Was he serious when he told people that their sins were forgiven? Or was he just being dramatic? Were their sins really forgiven? If they were—and we are to believe that Jesus had the power to forgive sins with a statement, why didn’t he just speak forgiveness over the entire world and retire to the countryside? Why the cross?

I want to invite you to begin loosening whatever grasp you may have on punitive substitutionary atonement as a complete explanation of the crucifixion of Jesus. I assure you that my intentions here are not to remove your beliefs and ideas but only to open them up to new information. For example, did you know that punitive substitutionary atonement is not the only explanation Christians have offered for the cross throughout history? It wasn’t even the first explanation. Truth be told, the theory that Jesus had to die on the cross in order to appease God’s wrath against you did not experience wide acceptance until Anselm of Canterbury penned *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became a Man) in 1098 ce. Consider this summation offered by Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr:

After Anselm, Christians have paid a huge price for what theologians called “substitutionary atonement theory”—the strange idea that before God could love us God needed and demanded Jesus to be a blood sacrifice to atone for our sin-drenched humanity. With that view, salvation depends upon a problem instead of a divine proclamation about the core nature of reality. As if God could need payment, and even a very violent transaction, to be able to love and accept “his” own children—a message that those with an angry, distant, absent, or abusive father were already far too programmed to believe.⁸

Without abandoning your current beliefs about substitutionary atonement or getting lost in the varying theories Christians have developed over the last 2,000 years to explain the cross, I want to ask you to consider the possibility that sin is our problem and not God’s.

⁸ Richard Rohr, *Jesus: Human and Divine*, Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation, accessed March 20, 2015, http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation-Love-Not-Atonement.html?aid=iXa_UNN2YaQ&soid=1103098668616



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION FIVE DIALOGUE GUIDE: GOD IS ANGRY AND DOESN'T LIKE ME—ESPECIALLY WHEN I SIN - PT. 2

Handouts:

- "What if Paul is Right?" (pp. 64-68 of Faith Lies)
- "Here Comes a Lion" (pp. 74-77 of Faith Lies)
- "Who Are You?" (pp. 79-86 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence - Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

"We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone."

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “What if Paul is Right?” (pp. 64-68 of Faith Lies)

- Is it possible for someone to lead a life without mistakes?
Is living a perfect, mistake-free life the goal of our faith?
 - If Paul is right and our behavior doesn’t determine our access to or relationship with God, then what does?

HANDOUT: “Here Comes a Lion” (pp. 74-77 of Faith Lies)

Watch the “Simba and Rafiki” clip on YouTube as prompted
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eO4tM9nTggk>

- Cosmic Scorekeeper or Loving Parent—which God do you interact with more in your life? In your church? Why?
- How does recognizing we are part of the family change things?

HANDOUT: “Who Are You?” (pp. 79-86 of Faith Lies)

- How do you feel about a God who will cross every possible boundary—even to the point of feeling Godforsaken—to be in relationship with you?
 - What impact does saying or hearing the “I Am” statements have on you?

TABLE / RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to read the contents of the scroll they have and either: Respond to one of the “faith lies” already on the scroll or write about a completely different “faith lie” that you think separated you from God. Leader(s) should allow 5 minutes for this exercise.

As participants add to their parchment scrolls, the leaders can play the “Needle and Thread” music video in the background. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncMImEvZZcg>

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer a blessing or benediction to the participants as the basket is passed around for the collection of the participants’ scrolls.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies “Chapter 3” pages 87 – 99.

FAITH LIES

Session Five Handout

WHAT IF PAUL IS RIGHT?

The God that holds you over the Pit of Hell, much as one holds a Spider, or some loathsome Insect, over the Fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his Wrath towards you burns like Fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the Fire;⁹

What happened to you as you read through the Jonathan Edwards quote above? How do you respond? Is there something in you that rejects the philosophy behind Edwards' sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God?" If you are like me, perhaps you have picked up a milder version of this philosophy. You may not think that God holds you over the "Pit of Hell" like a loathsome spider, but you may believe that God disapproves of you—or is disappointed with your life.

Behind the lie "God is angry and doesn't like me—especially when I sin" is the idea that your relationship with God—God's affection for you—is based on your behavior. The better person you are, the more God likes and loves you—the more God will bless you. The more mistakes you make and sins you commit, the less God likes and loves you—the less God will bless you. Whether we recognize it or not, this lie requires God to have anger—or even worse, the dreaded biblical wrath—over the sinful behavior of people. This lie characterizes God as the cosmic scorekeeper watching our every move and shaking the Godhead in disappointment—wondering how we could repeatedly be so bad.

Let me ask you a question that someone once asked me in order to expose the lie that God is angry and doesn't like me when I sin.

Is it possible for someone to lead a life without mistakes?

That is, if you tried really hard, could you do it? Could you lead a mistake-free life? My experience tells me that it is not possible. In fact, my life screams out from the top of its lungs that I cannot live without mistakes. My mistakes are too numerous and too recurring to think otherwise.

The apostle Paul, who wrote most of what is known as the New Testament, didn't think a perfect life from start to finish was possible either. In his letter to the Romans, he stated, "You see, all have sinned, and all their futile attempts to reach God in His glory fail." (Rom. 3:23 VOICE)

According to Paul, everyone makes mistakes and even our best behavior can't equip us to reach God. It's as if Paul wants his audience to consider that behavior—our ability to live without mistakes—is not supposed to define our relationship to God. Paul seems to think that God is not surprised by our mistakes or the fact that we all make them. But if Paul is right and God is not surprised by our mistakes—God even expects our mistakes—then why would God be angry? If Paul is right and it is impossible for any human being to live a completely perfect life but our relationship with God is based on our ability to avoid sinning, where does that leave us? In a word, screwed. There are two ideas that are contradicting each other here. One idea tells us that God is angry and doesn't like us when we sin—that we are sinners with whom God is wrathfully disappointed. The

second idea tells us that no one can lead a sinless life. The two ideas do not work together at all. What kind of God would say to you, “Our relationship will be defined by your ability to act right. Oh, and by the way, it is impossible for you to act right all the time ... so, good luck!”?

At best, if God bases God’s relationship with us on how we behave and it is impossible for us to live a sinless life from start to finish, we end up with a continually transactional relationship with God—a relationship that has us trying to behave well enough or ask forgiveness enough times to secure God’s love. In this scenario, we see our blessings as a result of our good behavior and our troubles as a result of our bad behavior. We hold God in a distant relationship of voodoo, hoping and praying that if we mix the right combination of prayers and behavior, God will be appeased. At worst, we end up with a God who we believe is responsible for our impossible circumstances—a God that has set us up to fail.

But what if Paul is right?

What if Paul’s aforementioned statement in Romans declaring, “All have sinned” and “failed to reach God in His glory” is not a statement of how disappointing and infuriating we are to God but rather a statement of the human condition? What if Paul is saying sin has never been what our relationship with God is about?

⁹ Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. A Sermon Preached at Eneld, July 8th, 1741.” Reiner Smolinski, editor. Electronic Texts in American Studies. Paper 54, accessed October 29, 2015, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=etas>

FAITH LIES

Session Five Handout

HERE COMES A LION

Do you know the story of Simba the lion as popularized in Disney's *The Lion King*?¹⁰ If you don't, I will summarize it, but I highly recommend that you watch the movie—or the play—if you have the opportunity. Simba, a young cub, is born to Mufasa, the Lion King. During his upbringing, Simba's uncle, who is jealous for Mufasa's throne, plots to kill Mufasa and frame Simba for his own father's death. The plot successfully places Simba in danger, and Mufasa's efforts to rescue Simba actually get him killed—right before Simba's eyes. Simba wrongly believes he is responsible for the king's death and runs away in shame. He leaves his kingdom, his family, his land, and disappears into a scavenging existence of anonymity.

We, too, believe the lie that we killed the King. We wrongly believe that our sins led our King to his crucifixion. As a result, we fail to live into the truth of our family line and land and, instead, settle into lives of scavenging and anonymity. The problem with that reality for Simba and for us is that it's based on a lie. We didn't kill the King. Once more, enabling us to run away is not why the King sacrificed himself. The King sacrificed himself for his child—his blood—his royal offspring—his heir. Herein lies an important clue to a fuller truth.

Justification + Adoption

In order for justification to make any sense, it must be united with adoption. Adoption is the part of the story that we have lost. Adoption is exactly what you think it means—that we are part of the family. We are daughters and sons, brothers and sisters, heirs to the Kingdom of God.

God loves you more than you can possibly imagine. God loves you so much that you are given the freedom to choose whether or not you will love God back. But God doesn't stop there—no way, no how. God sees that we are blinded and imprisoned by our sin. We just can't see past our failures to believe that a perfect and selfless God would be in relationship with a flawed and selfish people. So God makes a way. God creates a path, declaring that we are not only justified—we are family.

Watch the YouTube clip:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eO4tM9nTggk>

There is this great moment in *The Lion King* when Simba's rabbi, Rafiki, leads him to a pool of water in the jungles where he has been hiding in shame. Simba hasn't seen his reflection while he has been growing up as a scavenger. The last time he saw himself, he was a scared little lion cub. Now, listening to the spirit of his father, he sees himself in the water and sees his father looking back at him. His reflection—that of a grown lion who looks like Mufasa—reminds him of who his father really is and therefore who he really is. He is not a scavenger. He is not anonymous. He is the beloved son of Mufasa, the Lion King. He is the royal heir to the throne.

We too have neglected to see our divine reflection. We have been imprisoned, oppressed, and blinded from seeing ourselves as God sees us—as children of God. We have settled into a theology that tells us we killed the King and are therefore unworthy. It's not true. You are not a scavenger. You are not anonymous. You are the

beloved child of the Most High God. You are a royal heir to the throne. You are part of the family. Justification is important. I am not denying that I sin. I behave in ways that God says are not good for me or for others. As Paul reminds us, we all bring sin into our relationship with God. We are the ones who lose sight. We are the ones who get imprisoned. We are the ones who are held captive, unable to see our identity independent of our failures. If the story of God affirms anything, however, it affirms that God can always see us for who we really are. God can see even when we cannot. Therefore, we are justified. But who needed to know that? Did God not think we were justified before Christ died on the cross or was that our thought? Could God really not bear to look at us—let alone be in relationship with us before Jesus made the ultimate atonement for our sins, or was it us who could not bear to look? Is it God who defines and justifies people by their behavior and therefore requires substitutionary atonement or is that something we require?

God notices and condemns bad behavior in the stories of the Bible. God even allows the consequences of those bad behaviors to be painfully and fatally experienced on numerous occasions. Does God ever use those bad behaviors to terminate relationship? I humbly submit to you that the answer to that question is “No!”. Death and failure are renewable resources in the Kingdom of God. That is to say, God does not allow people’s mistakes—and the consequences that accompany them (including death)—to terminate relationship.

God is not concerned with my sin because it makes me unbearable to God. God is concerned with my sin because it wounds me, and it wounds others.

¹⁰ Irene Mecchi, Jonathan Roberts, and Linda Woolverton, *The Lion King DVD*, directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff (Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 1995).

FAITH LIES

Session Five Handout

WHO ARE YOU?

From the beginning of time, God has practiced humility and self-limitation. Maybe it's the only way that God could be in an authentic relationship with finite creatures, or maybe it's because God simply thought it best, but in either case God started by retreating enough to create the cosmos. Then God withdrew enough to let Israel chart its own course, for both good and ill. And ultimately God was humbled in a way that neither the Hebrews nor the Hellenists had thought possible, by inhabiting a human being—for that matter, a human being of humble origins. God built a bridge between humanity and divinity, and then God walked over it.

When God fully entered the human experience in Jesus, new vistas of understanding were opened. Joy, pathos, trial, temptation, happiness, grief—God went from observer to participant in the whole gamut of human existence. And then some things you'd never expect God to experience—existential loneliness, god-forsakenness, atheism, death—even that became part of the life of God.¹¹

In the above quote, author and theologian Tony Jones is asking us to consider that the cross was God fully identifying with humanity. God joined us in solidarity of suffering—in every agony we experience—including the agony of being abandoned by God.

The night before his crucifixion, Jesus pleads with God for any other outcome than the cross. He receives no answer. After suffering through the false arrest, the mockery of justice in his hidden trial, the horrific torture of being whipped to the point of death, the grueling pain and shame of crucifixion—just before his death—Jesus cries out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46) God experiences the agony of crying out to the universe, “Where are you, God?!”

This idea paints the cross not as a defensive reaction by God to sin, evil, or death that changes humanity but as a purposeful, initiated act of love, empathy, and identification with humanity that changes God. The crucifixion of Jesus forever builds a connection of suffering between God and humanity—a connection that nothing can separate. Jesus went to the cross to obliterate every possible shred of distance between God and us. The cross, then, is not God's response to our bad behavior. It is relationship. It is connection. It is understanding.

And the cross is not even the end of the story. Jesus rose. Even abandonment and death could not constrict God's relationship with God's people. The presence of God's Holy Spirit serves as an advocate and counselor to God's people. As Jones writes, “Everything after the crucifixion is meant to ensure that we never again feel forsaken by God. We may at times feel alone, but since the crucifixion, God has made sure that we aren't alone.”¹²

The picture God has painted and is painting is much grander than just substitutionary atonement and justification. The relationship God offers every son and every daughter is much richer than a relationship governed by “good” behavior. This truth is much more comprehensive. It removes the narrow and imprisoning idea that the whole point of our relationship with Christ is because we needed to be forgiven.

God loves you. Period. In your most sinful moment, in the times when you feel completely alone and abandoned, God's love for you does not decrease or disappear. We must carry the full truth of our relationship with God and each other. We must shine the light of love, family, belonging, and freedom upon every lie that tells us we must perform in order to receive. As my rabbi has taught me, we do not work for God's approval—we work from God's approval.

The beautifully complex picture such truths paint must guide the rest of our ideas about God and each other. Accordingly, let us be plain and clear with the truth.

Read these statements out loud. Okay, make sure you are alone first. Or maybe not—perhaps you are about to cause the best kind of scene wherever you are. Whatever the case may be—hear these words. Don't just read them in your mind—let the favor of the LORD be proclaimed out loud over your life.

I Am not my sins and mistakes.

I Am God's child.

I Am acceptable to God.

I Am pleasing to God.

I Am welcomed.

I Am received.

I Am God's delight.

I Am God's desire.

I Am a child of the Most High God—a beloved (daughter or son).

I Am the delight of God's heart and God's joy.

I Am so loved that God endured the abandonment of the cross to identify with me.

I Am God's favorite. So is my neighbor. So is my enemy.

¹¹ Tony Jones, *Did God Kill Jesus?: Searching for Love in History's Most Famous Execution* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 245.

¹² *Ibid.*, 246.



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION SIX DIALOGUE GUIDE: THE DEVIL IS GOD'S COUNTERPART - PART 1

Handouts:

- "Ben Fay did it." (pp. 87-90 of Faith Lies)
- "Who is *Satan*?" (pp. 92-97 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence - Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

"We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone."

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “Ben Fay did it.” (pp. 87-90 of Faith Lies)

- What arises in you when faced with the possibility that your understanding of *satan* or “evil” might contain a faith lie or incomplete idea?
- What evidence of dualism do you recognize in your worldview?
What evidence of dualism do you recognize in your faith?

HANDOUT: “Who is Satan?” (pp. 92-97 of Faith Lies)

Watch the “Lucifer Season 1 Trailer” clip on YouTube before reading
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4bF_quwNtw

- Who or what do you say *satan* is?
- How has your perception or understanding of *satan* or the devil changed during your lifetime?

TABLE / RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to read the contents of the scroll they have and either: Respond to one of the “faith lies” already on the scroll or Write about a completely different “faith lie” with which they are currently struggling. Leader(s) should allow 2-4 minutes for this exercise.

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer a blessing or benediction to the participants as the basket is passed around for the collection of the participants’ scrolls.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies “Chapter 3” pages 100 – 112.

FAITH LIES

Session Six Handout

BEN FAY DID IT.

When I was a young boy, my first best friend was named Ben Fay. Ben and I were buddies through preschool, church, and the most important reason of all: our mothers were friends. Ben and I were much like any other young children—capable of mischief on our own but capable of so much more when we combined our talents. Somewhere along the path of my relationship with Ben Fay, I discovered that he was a handy person to have around ... even when he wasn't around. Now you're asking, "What the heck does that mean?" It means that I crafted an imaginary friend for the times I was alone, and I named him after my very real friend Ben Fay. Are you with me? There was a real Ben Fay—an actual little boy—my buddy whom I would play with. There was also an imaginary Ben Fay—not real—that I would utilize as needed.

At this point, you might begin to wonder if you have committed some of your very valuable time to reading the theological musings of a dolt who is so dense he could not think to name his imaginary childhood friend something original. I understand this wondering, and I want to assure you that my motivations in creating an imaginary Ben Fay were thoughtful and duplicitous. You see, I didn't set out to create an imaginary friend.

One day after the real Ben Fay and I had been playing and he had gone home, my mother was upset about a mess we had made and left for someone else to clean up. In the middle of my scolding, it dawned on me that I was not alone in my guilt, so I blurted out a phrase that I would go on to repeat numerous times in my young life: "Ben Fay did it!" My mother, knowing that Ben Fay had helped make the mess, eased up and recognized that I alone was not to blame. I couldn't believe it. It had worked! She was not mad at me!! When I realized that Ben Fay didn't have to be around to accept some or all of the blame for my actions, the imaginary Ben Fay was born. From then on, any time I faced an inquisition, consequence, or punishment that felt like more than I could handle on my own, I would just throw Ben Fay under the bus.

Mom: "Who made this mess?!"

Me: "Ben Fay did it."

My Sister: "Who ate all the cookies?!"

Me: "Ben Fay did it."

Dad: "Darrell!!"

Me: "Ben Fay did it."

It kind of rolls off the tongue, doesn't it? Four sweet syllables to move the focus off me and on to someone else—a simple phrase to paint me as the victim. I feel it necessary to digress for a moment and acknowledge that while it has been thirty-five years or so since I have seen Ben Fay, I assume he is still out there somewhere. If you know Ben Fay, please don't think less of him for being my unknowing accomplice in crime. And, whatever you do, please do not blame your own troubles on Ben Fay!

So where am I going with this? How does Ben Fay relate to the lie that the devil is God's counterpart? I want to invite you into the tension between the real Ben Fay and the imaginary Ben Fay. What I mean by tension is that we are going to stay in between without coming to resolution one way or another. Ben Fay was a real person.

Ben Fay was also a creation of my imagination that I used to explain and deal with my own behavior and the consequences thereof. To decide on which Ben Fay was to blame for all my misbehavior is not the question. To decide on whether or not Ben Fay was real is not the point either. We need to stay in the tension and ask the more important questions.

The lie that oppresses us and limits our faith is not even about the “realness” of evil. Let me be very clear here. Evil is real. I have yet to meet someone whose life has not been scarred by evil. Right now, all over the world, real people are experiencing very real pain and very real oppression caused by the presence of evil in this world. Our pain and our oppression are not to be dismissed as delusions. They are real and are to be validated and fought against.

What is at stake here is not whether evil is real. It's not even whether the devil is real. It's whether or not that evil, or the devil, can stand against our God. The question we need to ask is who have we said the devil is and how does that distort our view of God and of ourselves? The purpose of this exploration is not to decide one way or the other if the devil is real. Rather, I am hopeful that we can agree not to decide on the “realness” of the devil and instead decide that the problematic lie is that the devil is somehow God's counterpart or opposite. This is a lie about a good God versus a bad god—what is known as dualism. Dual means two opposing forces. Good versus evil, dark versus light, right versus wrong. This is a lie that allowed me to divide my childhood existence into the good and innocent Darrell and the bad and mischievous Ben Fay.

The primary example of dualism in our world is the idea that there is a good, supernatural force guiding the universe battling an evil, supernatural force corrupting the universe. God versus *Satan* is neat and orderly. It makes sense to us because it successfully divides and organizes our reality for us. It just seems simple to think that everything that is good and right is because of God and everything that is bad and wrong is because of the devil.

As much as we might feel that such thinking is neat and orderly, it falls apart really quickly as soon as something that is bad and wrong touches our life. When evil or corruption really hits home and affects us personally, we want answers. “Where were you, God?” “Why did you let that happen to me?” In turn, those questions shine a bright light on the misleading idea of dualism and lead to questions like, “If God created everything, why did God create the devil?” or “How did God lose that battle to the devil?” Is that what happened? God somehow lost a match with the devil? Were God and the devil really fighting over your life, and the devil somehow snuck a sucker punch in? What originally seems orderly about dualism becomes confusing and disordered really quickly as soon as we start talking plainly about the devil.

FAITH LIES

Session Six Handout

WHO IS SATAN?

If we understand the Bible not as a monolith or static report but as a library of books that tell the progressing story of God and God's people, we should not be surprised to find that different writings from different people in different places from different times would reflect different ideas about the devil. Let me be blunt—there simply is not a consistent idea throughout the Bible about who or what the devil is.

Let's look at a few examples of "devil-referencing" Scripture, each of which uses the Hebraic word *satan*.

Numbers 22 tells the story of Balaam, his donkey, and an angel of the LORD who stands as a *satan* or adversary against them.

Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. The angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as a *satan*, because your way is perverse before me."
(NUM. 22:31–32)

The beginning of the Book of Job paints a peculiar picture of *satan* as being a heavenly being who serves at the discretion of God.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and *Satan* also came among them. The LORD said to *Satan*, "Where have you come from?" *Satan* answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." The LORD said to *Satan*, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." Then *Satan* answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." The LORD said to *Satan*, "Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!" So *Satan* went out from the presence of the LORD.
(JOB 1:6–12)

Zechariah 3 describes the fourth vision Zechariah received where *satan* acts as an accuser against the high-priest Joshua.

Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the LORD, and *Satan* standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to *Satan*, "The LORD rebuke you, O *Satan*! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this man a brand plucked from the fire?"
(ZECH. 3:1–2)

Wow! What a mess! Any one of these verses by themselves can turn our ideas about the devil upside down. Where do we begin?

Let's start with the word *satan*. *Satan* is a Hebraic word that means adversary or accuser. In each of these instances, *satan* is precisely the Hebraic word that is used. In fact, if we are looking for any reference to "the devil" in the Hebraic scriptures, *satan* is all we are going to find. There are no other references to any kind of "devil" or "antichrist" in all of the books that comprise the Hebrew Bible. You may be thinking, Well, duh! Of course, the Hebrew Bible doesn't talk about the Antichrist because the Christ had not yet come. That is a very valid point, but don't miss that there is also no labeling of *satan* as Lucifer, Mephistopheles, or Beelzebub in the Hebrew Bible either—at least not as we understand it.

Historically, some have looked to the Isaiah 14:12 reference of Lucifer in the King James Version of the Bible as a descriptor of a singular, supernatural, evil being.

"How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!"
(ISA. 14:12 KJV)

If we keep reading in the New Revised Standard Version, however, the continuing description doesn't jive very well with a single, supernatural being.

Those who see you will stare at you, and ponder over you:

"Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who would not let his prisoners go home?"

All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb; but you are cast out, away from your grave, like loathsome carrion, clothed with the dead, those pierced by the sword, who go down to the stones of the Pit, like a corpse trampled underfoot.

You will not be joined with them in burial, because you have destroyed your land, you have killed your people.
(ISA. 14:15–20)

To be sure, there are elements in this description that sound a lot like what many of us have come to think of as "the devil." Yet, there are other portions—like the fact that this description states that Lucifer is a "man"—that don't seem to make sense. In fact, these verses don't only describe Lucifer as a man but as a "dead" man that is "cast out" from his grave like "loathsome carrion." How does that work? If the point of this story is to warn listeners and readers of the continuing presence of a supernatural, evil-incarnate being, then why does this story say that he is dead?

The simple answer is that this story was never about the devil at all. This description is an indictment of a cruel Babylonian king, a very real and very dead human being. And friends, this is no mystery or Bible code. The verses immediately preceding this passage state:

"When the LORD has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon..."

(ISA. 14:3-4)

The whole thing is a taunt. The Scripture itself tells us that this whole section is a thumb-your-nose at the king of Babylon poem. So if this passage was never about the devil, how in the world did we get to thinking that Lucifer was the name of the devil?

You know the answer before you even read it. Interpretation. People interpreted this passage to be about the devil and, in so doing, concluded that Lucifer must be the proper name of the devil.

Watch this interpretive journey!

In the entire Bible, the name Lucifer is only used in this single location—Isaiah 14:12. As our oldest copies of the Book of Isaiah are written in ancient Hebrew, we should note the Hebrew word that is used in Isaiah 14:12—the very word that has been translated as Lucifer—is hehel. Hehel means to shine or bear light. Over a thousand years after this taunt of a Babylonian king was first written, a fourth-century priest and historian named Jerome translated the entire Bible into Latin—a translation that is known as the Vulgate. In his translation, Jerome interpreted the “shining” and “light bearing” of hehel as the “morning star”—also known as the planet Venus. Can you guess what the Latin word for the planet Venus is? That’s right—Lucifer.

Come forward another 1,100 years or so and we find the writers of the King James Version of the Bible using Jerome’s Vulgate to translate the Scripture into English. Guess which word they brought forward from the Latin? That’s right, Lucifer. Still, this interpretive timeline only explains the insertion of the word Lucifer. Neither Jerome nor the King James writers asserted that Lucifer was *Satan*. The suggestion that this passage was describing a supernatural, evil being and not a Babylonian king developed later through even more interpretative choices. Over time, people read meaning into the text. The taunt of the Babylonian king was no longer relevant to them; they had no concept of Babylonian kings because Babylon had faded into history. When they read these very real, very contextualized verses in Isaiah, they didn’t have the context, so they interpreted. These weren’t bad people; they were just like you and me—meaning-making machines. Instead of letting the text say just what it said—that this was to be a taunt of a dead, Babylonian king—people assigned a meaning to this passage about the devil—a meaning that this passage was never meant to convey. Thus, the belief formed that the unflattering description of a ruler in Isaiah 14 was referring to a singular, supernatural evil being—and that his name must, therefore, be Lucifer.

Dramatic pause.

Did that blow your mind? If it doesn’t, that’s okay, but don’t miss this prime example of how time, context, translation, and interpretation can drastically impact our understanding and shape our world.

Seriously.



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION SEVEN DIALOGUE GUIDE: THE DEVIL IS GOD'S COUNTERPART - PART 2

Handouts:

- "The Counterpart" (pp. 107-109 of Faith Lies)
- "Three Better Ideas" (pp. 110-111 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence - Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

"We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone."

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “The Counterpart” (pp. 107-109 of Faith Lies)

- The biblical library presents a spectrum or range of experience with *satan*—from human behavior to a singular evil being. Where does your experience of *satan* fit in relation to that spectrum?
- How do you recognize or notice *satan*—in any form—as a counterpart in your life?

HANDOUT: “Three Better Ideas” (pp. 110-111 of Faith Lies)

- What do you fear about *satan*—or the devil?
- Does believing that God stands unopposed and is on your side change anything for you?
- How do you process the idea that we are complicit—that “Evil does not get into this world without us”?

TABLE / RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to read the contents of the scroll they have and either: Respond to one of the “faith lies” already on the scroll or Write about a completely different “faith lie” with which they are currently struggling. Leader(s) should allow 2-4 minutes for this exercise.

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer a blessing or benediction to the participants as the basket is passed around for the collection of the participants’ scrolls.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies “Chapter 4” pages 113 - 130.

FAITH LIES

Session Seven Handout

THE COUNTERPART

We cannot possibly look to the books of the Bible—Hebrew or New Testament—and arrive at a singular, inclusive answer of what or who the devil is. There are scriptures in the Hebrew Bible that call good and obedient angels on direct orders from God *satan*. There are scriptures in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian texts that refer to human beings as *satan*, or devils. There are also biblical texts that seem to indicate the presence of an accusing, adversarial angel that is interested in oppressing and tempting humanity. So which is it?

- Is *satan* really an angel agent of God, doing only the will of God?
- Is *satan* a singular demon who opposes and accuses humanity?
- Is *satan* a general term for those who oppose and accuse—be they human or otherwise?
- Is *satan* a singular, evil being or a metaphor that represents the progressive apprehension of the people who lived and told these stories?

The answer according to the Bible is yes. This strange library simultaneously asserts that *satan* is all of the above. *Satan* is a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Human beings can be a *satan*. *Satan* is the accusing force that plays the role of bringing us face to face with the consequences of our actions.

If we posit a singular understanding or representation of the devil—no matter what it is, we are choosing to omit the texts that stand in contradiction to our singular point of view. In short, we are cutting up our own Jefferson Bible on the topic of *satan*. If we ask the wrong question, we will get the wrong answer.

The Bible simply does not singularly answer the question of **who** *satan* is. But there is a singular representation of who *satan* is **not**. *Satan* is not God's counterpart. Whether *satan* is an angel on a holy mission, a fallen angel, the accuser, the tempter, the trainer, Peter, Judas, or a metaphor for our struggle with the evil within, at no point is *satan* outside of the authority and power of God. At no point is *satan* God's adversary.

Now, friends, let me be clear once again. The point of coming out from under this lie is not to question whether or not the devil is real.

- Was Ben Fay a real boy—my tangible, knowable friend? Yes.
- Was Ben Fay an intangible symbol of my struggle to justify some of my behavior and a safe figure behind which I could hide? Yes.
- Is *satan* a singular being who tempts, accuses, and opposes humanity? Yes.
- Is *satan* a metaphorical representation of those forces that stand in opposition to our relationship with God—including our own behavior? Yes.

It is not an either-or question according to the biblical texts—it is a both-and. We are invited to stay in that tension. In fact, the only way we can escape that tension is by lying to ourselves and each other through mental gymnastics and bad biblical interpretation.

Yet, there is a place where the tension stops. Nothing—and, friends, I mean nothing—in the Bible communicates that *satan*—be he singular and tangible or symbolic and intangible—stands in opposition to God. The movie *The Usual Suspects* is often quoted for its line that states, “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing people that he didn’t exist.”¹³ While that is a great line in the context of that movie, it is nevertheless dualistic thinking. The truth is the greatest trick that the devil ever pulled was convincing people that he was God’s equal—and that we have something to fear.

Whether the devil exists or not is the wrong question to ask. The right question is whom does *satan* oppose? Whom does *satan* accuse? You already know the answer before you read it. The Bible is consistent in its stance that none can oppose God. God has no counterpart. *Satan*, in whatever form we want to embrace, is our adversary—not God’s. *Satan* is our accuser—not God’s. *Satan* is our enemy—not God’s. God may not have a counterpart, but we sure do.

¹³ Christopher McQuarrie, *The Usual Suspects*, VHS, Directed by Bryan Singer (New York, NY: PolyGram Video, 1995).

FAITH LIES

Session Seven Handout

THREE BETTER IDEAS

1. God stands unopposed and is on your side.

If God has no counterpart or adversary, then nothing that comes against you—no circumstance, no tragedy, no pain, no attack—is bigger or more than God. The God who is for you, the God who delights in you, who celebrates you, who loves you beyond understanding, is never overpowered or outmatched. None of it scares God or sends God packing. Whatever it is, God will be ... and God will always be for you.

2. Satan opposes us and that makes us responsible.

If satan is our adversary and not God's, then we stand as adversaries to the ways of satan. We are the opposition of satan—regardless of whether we understand satan as a singular, evil being or a metaphor for wrestling with our own evil. If satan, in any form, claims a victory in this world, we bear the responsibility. I know this is a tough one to grasp, but knuckle down here. If satan is that which stands in opposition to humanity—that which tempts, accuses, and seeks to destroy us—then we are responsible for falling to those temptations, for believing the accusations, and for being subject to attack.

To be blunt, evil does not get into this world—it does not get expressed in our reality—without us. We are not innocent victims. We are complicit. Recognizing that God has no counterpart moves us into a place of growing accountability. We cannot hide behind dualism and pretend there is a cosmic battle being waged between God and the devil and we are just bystanders who have no control.

The cosmic battle is over, and God won—rest in that truth. But the battle was never between God and satan. The battle that God won was between our freedom and our eternal consequences. Even if we reject our true identity, even if we believe the lies and the accusations of the enemy, even if we use the very freedom God provides to attack God, we are still beloved, and we still have a home. The God of the Bible fights to set people free from the very oppression they cause. That battle is over. God won.

This same God who fought the cosmic battle and won on our behalf invites us to join in the continuing redemption of creation. God invites us to partner in restoring the very shalom (peace) we disrupted in the first place. We are once again—and continuously—given a choice. Standing in opposition to our reception of that invitation ... satan. Whether we understand satan as the singular evil being with a legion of demons in tow or some internal struggle with temptation and evil, both stand in opposition to our acceptance of God's invitation to join in the restoration of all things. If evil is released on this earth, it is because we either let it happen or we caused it to happen—not because the devil snuck one in while God wasn't looking. The devil is our adversary, not God's. We are called to oppose satan. We are called to live in the truth of who we are and who God is. We are called to love.

3. We have nothing to fear.

Whatever satan may be in our lives at any given moment (a temptation, an oppression, an accuser), none of it can oppose the good God who loves you and fights for your freedom. This is really the kicker of it all. This truth may seem so easy and so obvious that it may actually seem counterintuitive. Satan, in whatever form, is

our adversary, not God's. God has no adversary and is for us. So while we are called to stand in opposition to satan, we do not do so alone. We stand in opposition to satan with the Creator of all things, the Sovereign of all creation going before us. Satan—no matter what satan may be—doesn't stand a chance. If we are living into the loving relationship God offers us, we have nothing to fear—not demons, not a singular fallen angel, not evil, not even death.



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION EIGHT DIALOGUE GUIDE: I AM SUPPOSED TO PROTECT AND DEFEND GOD AND MY FAITH - PT. 1

Handouts:

- "Enemies Foreign & Domestic" (pp. 113-116 of Faith Lies)
- "Who's in Charge Here?" (pp. 117-119 of Faith Lies)
- "Topographical Obstruction" (pp. 123-126 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence - Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

"We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone."

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “Enemies Foreign & Domestic” (pp. 113-116 of Faith Lies)

- What is your reaction to Stephen Hawking declaring that there is no God?
 - Do you find the three stated truths about defending God to be true and helpful or incomplete ideas? Why?

HANDOUT: “Who’s in Charge Here?” (pp. 117-119 of Faith Lies)

- Have you been told that a person or a group was an enemy to your faith or your God? What impact did that have on you?
- How does it feel to consider the possibility that it has never been and will never be your job to defend or protect God from anything?

HANDOUT: “Topographical Obstruction” (pp. 123-126 of Faith Lies)

Watch the “Peter & Cornelius” clip on YouTube as prompted
<https://youtu.be/60qOdmAINMM>

- What “mountains” do you recognize obstructing relationship in your life? In your church?
 - How should the story of Peter and Cornelius inform or challenge the mountains we are facing?

TABLE / RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to read the contents of the scroll they have and either: Respond to one of the “faith lies” already on the scroll or Write about a completely different “faith lie” with which they are currently struggling. Leader(s) should allow 2-4 minutes for this exercise.

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer a blessing or benediction to the participants as the basket is passed around for the collection of the participants’ scrolls.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies
“Chapter 4” pages 130 – 146

FAITH LIES

Session Eight Handout

ENEMIES FOREIGN & DOMESTIC

Do you know who Stephen Hawking was? If not, you should. Stephen Hawking was a renowned theoretical physicist. He served as the Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at the University of Cambridge for thirty years and served as the director of research at Cambridge's Centre for Theoretical Cosmology. Are you impressed (or intimidated) yet? Dr. Hawking wrote a number of books discussing the nature and fabric of the universe and received numerous awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom—which is the highest civilian honor awarded in the United States. Are you getting a picture of Stephen Hawking? He was a serious man. For most of his life, Stephen Hawking could very well have been the most intelligent and most reflective human being on the planet. I think Dr. Hawking was smart enough to deserve my attention and consideration.

Shortly before his death, Dr. Hawking was asked in an interview to clarify some remarks he made about the existence of God and how those remarks were to be understood compared to an earlier statement made in his book *A Brief History of Time*.¹⁴ In the 1988 work, Hawking wrote that a unifying theory of science would help humanity “know the mind of God.”¹⁵ This was a riff on a quote often attributed to another theoretical physicist—Albert Einstein—who supposedly said, “I want to know God's thoughts; the rest are details.”¹⁶ Coming forward twenty-five years or so from Hawking's statement in *A Brief History of Time*, he was given an opportunity to further expound on the subject in an interview with the Spanish paper *El Mundo*. Hawking stated, “Before we understand science, it is natural to believe that God created the universe. But now science offers a more convincing explanation. What I meant by ‘we would know the mind of God’ is, we would know everything that God would know, if there were a God, which there isn't.”¹⁷

Bam! That is one of those drop-the-microphone-and-leave-the-room quotes, isn't it? There was no uncertainty, no ambiguity. “There is no God. See ya later, Hawking out.” What are we supposed to do with that? One of the most intelligent thinkers to ever live said that science proves that God is not real. What does that do to you? What is welling up inside of your gut? Is one of those fight, flight, or freeze responses taking root in your faith right now? Do you feel yourself beginning to perform mental gymnastics to make Hawking's thoughts jive with your own? Maybe not. Maybe you feel your mind throwing up a wall to keep such arguments out. Maybe you find it easier just to dismiss Dr. Hawking as a lost soul who didn't really know what he was talking about. Do you want to argue with Dr. Hawking? Do you want to forget about him? Do you want to prove that God does exist?

If I'm honest with myself, I can admit that I have felt all of these responses at different times when I am faced with people, opinions, and worldviews that do not seem to fit into my understanding. As strange as it may seem, it is in our reaction to this benign story where we find our next lie—the idea that we, in some way, are responsible for defending or protecting God—that we need to be able to explain God and prove God in any situation at any time. Let's state some truths clearly in the first person:

1. I am not responsible for defending or protecting God—and that is a good thing because I need God to defend and protect me.
2. God will not falter or disappear if I do not argue correctly, fight for, or stand up in the name of God—and that is a good thing because if God could falter or disappear, God wouldn't be much of a God.

3. God does not need my protection or defense—and that is a good thing because if God did need my protection or defense, we would both be screwed.

Now, let these truths sink in. They just make sense, don't they? It is not my job to protect God. I couldn't even if I wanted to. And even if I could, would I want to protect and defend a God who needs protecting? Once again, I need to invite you to push through any resistance you may feel to doing the work and digging into this lie.

As much as these truths may ring true in our minds, there is still something in us that feels that it is right and good to stand up to Dr. Hawking—to straighten him out. You may believe, as I certainly have before, that it is your duty as a person of faith to fight back against those who would attack your faith. Even if you don't feel you need to attack those who oppose your worldview and faith, you may feel that you are nevertheless called to defend what you know to be true. Even worse, we all possess this ultimate capability to terminate and discard. If we feel we have done what we can to stand up to Dr. Hawking or even to persuade him of our viewpoint, and it has not worked, then we will dismiss him. We will declare him irrelevant, unreachable ... an enemy.

In that incredibly swift moment, we make a horrible trade. As quickly as neurons fire in our brains, we are capable of making a distinction that looks at one of God's children—the delight of God's life and the joy of God's heart—as an irrelevant distraction to our faith or an enemy to our God. In doing so, we trade away the truth that we have been called to partner with God to bring about the restoration of all things for the lie that we have been called to defend and protect our God against all enemies foreign and domestic.

¹⁴ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988).

¹⁵ Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 193.

¹⁶ Stephen B. McSwain, *The Enoch Factor: The Sacred Art of Knowing God* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2010) 82.

¹⁷ Elisha Rader Mannering, "Stephen Hawking Says He's An Athiest," WebPro News, Accessed September, 30, 2014, <http://www.webpronews.com/stephen-hawkingsays-hes-an-athiest-2014-09>

FAITH LIES

Session Eight Handout

WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

Who decides who our spiritual enemies are? Who gets to determine that those who stand in opposition to our worldview, our religion, our understanding of the faith, deserve to be terminated or discarded? Is there a chain of command? Is there even a trained and equipped leader who is called to make such distinctions? I used to think so. I used to think it was the responsibility of the religious leaders to tell us who our spiritual enemies were. Maybe you have thought that, too. I believed they were called to help us protect the faith against all enemies foreign and domestic. Pastors, ministers, bishops, deacons, even the Pope—these were the people who were responsible for making those distinctions, right?

It didn't take long for one of those leaders to make a distinction with which I did not agree. Rock and roll is the enemy? Dancing is the enemy? Russians are the enemy? Homosexuals are the enemy? Atheists are the enemy? I have heard and seen all of these distinctions made from the pulpit in my lifetime. When my parents' generation was young, they experienced devout, spiritual leaders declaring different ethnicities as the enemy. Were any of those trained and equipped leaders right? Should those people ever have been labeled as my enemy? Should I really have defended my God against rock and roll or homosexuals?

Friends, I know we have highly intelligent, deeply rooted people who lead our faith. I believe in their calling. But at the end of the day, they are people—like you and me. No matter whom you have followed in your faith or whom you are following now, they are not perfect. They make mistakes. The truth is, there is no chain of command. In determining how to relate to people—especially those people we perceive as a threat, there is just God and us. The power to decide is ours. God gives it to us and invites us to use it in partnership with God. We cannot give this power away to a religious leader. Even if we think we have and follow the directions of someone else, we are fooling ourselves. We are choosing to align with leaders. The choice—the power—remains ours.

What does all that mean? It means I have no one else to blame for anyone being declared an enemy to my God or me. I am the one who makes that distinction. Even if the idea does not originate within me, I have to choose to come into agreement with it. I, and I alone, have the power to decide from what God needs defense. I, and I alone, decide from whom my God and my faith must be protected. And if I cannot pass the responsibility off to someone else, then it seems only logical that I would ask God where I should spend my time defending. God, who are our spiritual enemies? Please point out those of whom you are afraid. Please show me the people who could cause the whole thing to crumble.

Let's be honest: how will God answer such a request? Is God afraid of anyone? We learned in the last chapter that God has no counterpart—no adversary. There has never been, there is not now, nor will there ever be an enemy to God who could cause the whole thing to crumble. Nothing knocks God off the throne. So if God is not at risk, then what is?

Now, my friends, we are getting to the heart of this lie. It is not God whom we defend and protect. It is ourselves. We may convince ourselves that we are standing up for what is right—that we are defending our God and our faith, but the reality is we are trying to assuage our own fear. When we encounter ideas, worldviews, beliefs, and doctrines that challenge our own, our most common response is fear. We are afraid

that our faith, our God, our ideas can't stand up to the test. We are afraid that we have put our trust and our faith in the wrong thing. We are afraid that we may have gotten the whole thing wrong. We are afraid of not believing strongly enough—that somehow our lack of faith will be the end of us. We are afraid of doubt. We are afraid of uncertainty. We are afraid of being wrong. We are afraid of looking ridiculous. We are afraid of change.

That is a pretty big laundry list of fears, but trust me when I tell you that it is not an exhaustive list. We encounter people whose behavior or ideas cause us to be afraid, and when we are afraid, we seek to control. Much like cats, people cannot be controlled. Even if it appears that we can control others, it is an illusion. To control another human, one must essentially destroy the spirit and power that makes the other “human” in the first place. In doing so, oppressors necessarily deform their own humanity and lose both their own identity and the identity of those they sought to control. It is simply impossible for human beings to control another human being because the process of control removes humanity from both sides of the equation. The fabric of this existence is freedom. It is hardwired into our being by a God who loves so deeply that freedom is the only logical course. Our fear causes us to try to control people, and when we cannot control them (a foregone conclusion), we ultimately make the decision to separate the uncontrollable from its true identity. Accordingly, we terminate relationship, discard people, label enemies, and blind ourselves.

Okay, great ... now what does all of that mean? How in the world does that help me in my day-to-day life? It means that I am not responsible for defending or protecting God from the bad ideas, doctrine, theology, morality, or behavior of other people. I couldn't do it even if I wanted to because I cannot control other people. It means that I do not have to worry about protecting my God against enemies, foreign and domestic, because in addition to lacking the authority to correctly recognize and ascertain who is an enemy, I also lack the ability to then control said enemy. In short, it is not my job to protect God. It never has been, and it never will be.

FAITH LIES

Session Eight Handout

TOPOGRAPHICAL OBSTRUCTION

I want you to imagine a mountain—not a picturesque mountainscape—but an obstacle. I want you to imagine a single mountain that stands between two sides and separates them. Now I want you to consider that mountain to be one of those sticky issues or questions on which people are so divided. Imagine that mountain to be an issue that puts you on one side of the mountain and other people on the other side—one of those issues about which everyone seems to be so resolute and certain.

Can you see it? On either side of the mountain is a base camp of people who are certain they are on the “right” side of the mountain. Now, whatever the mountain issue is for you, let me tell you: that is nothing compared to the mountain that stood between the apostle Peter and Cornelius in the story found in the tenth chapter of Acts.

The story of Acts 10 begins as we are introduced to Cornelius, who the text calls a “God-fearer.” A God-fearer was a non-Jew trying to live a faithful life with and for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Right away, we are introduced to a mountain—something that separates Peter and Cornelius. Peter is a Jew; he is on the inside. Cornelius was no Jew. He was, as N.T. Wright pictures him, “on the outside of Judaism...pressing his nose hard against the glass.”¹⁸ Outsiders were dangerous and impure, but the mountain got even bigger. In addition to being an outsider, Cornelius was a Roman centurion—a leader and an officer in the Roman army. Rome oppressed the Jews, killing them for living their lives before God instead of Caesar. Peter had grown up within a worldview that understood Rome was the enemy. Peter, as well as the rest of Jesus’ disciples, thought the Messiah would come to overthrow Rome with might and force. Instead, they watched as Roman soldiers tortured their rabbi and crucified him.

Are you beginning to get a sense for the size and complexity of the mountain that separated Cornelius and Peter? Culture, ethnicity, religion, purity, politics, economics, power—any one of these issues by itself would be enough to cause Peter to stand up to Rome and, by extension, Cornelius. There are numerous points—both philosophical and literal—at which Peter would be justified to say that Cornelius and his ilk had attacked Peter’s God and feel compelled to defend and protect his faith from such enemies. This is one big-arse mountain.

This pairing of Peter and Cornelius is not accidental. As the story opens, we hear that, while praying one day, Cornelius receives a visit from an angel who tells him to send to Joppa for a man named Peter. Faithfully, Cornelius does just that. While his servants are on their way to Joppa to retrieve Peter, the story shifts to Peter in Joppa, sitting on the roof of the home where he is staying and waiting for lunch. As Peter waits, he has a dream where he sees a giant sheet lowered to the earth from the heavens. On the sheet is every manner of wild beast and unclean animal. A voice tells the dreaming and apparently hungry Peter to kill and eat anything on the sheet. An observant Jew, Peter refuses, noting that God’s law forbids such behavior, and he would never do such an unclean thing. The voice corrects Peter, saying, “If God calls something permissible and clean, you must not call it forbidden and dirty!” This dream is repeated three times before Peter awakens to the arrival of Cornelius’ servants. Peter invites the servants into the home to hear their request and then goes with them to Caesarea.

They arrived in Caesarea the next afternoon just before three o'clock. Cornelius had anticipated their arrival and had assembled his relatives and close friends to welcome them. When Peter and Cornelius met, Cornelius fell at Peter's feet in worship, but Peter helped him up, saying "Stand up, man! I am just a human being!"

Talking things over, they went on into the house, where Cornelius introduced Peter to everyone who had come.

Peter addressed them, "You know, we Jews consider it a breach of divine law to associate, much less share, hospitality with outsiders. But God has shown me something in recent days: I should no longer consider any human beneath me or unclean. That's why I made no objection when you invited me; rather, I came willingly. Now let me hear the story of why you invited me here.

Cornelius said, "Four days ago at about this time, mid-afternoon, I was home praying. Suddenly there was a man right in front of me, flooding the room with light. He said, 'Cornelius, your daily prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God's attention. I want you to send to Joppa to get Simon, the one they call Peter. He's staying with Simon the Tanner down by the sea.'

"I wasted no time, did just as I was told, and you have generously accepted my invitation. So here we are, in the presence of God, ready to take in all that the Lord has given to tell us."

Peter exploded with good news: "It is clear to me now that God plays no favorites, that God accepts every person whatever his or her background, that God welcomes all who revere Him and do right. You already know that God sent a message to the people of Israel; it was a message of peace, peace through Jesus the Anointed—who is King of all people."
(Acts 10:23-38)

Acts 10 closes with the Holy Spirit being poured out on Cornelius, his family, and all the Gentiles in his household as Peter continues to tell the story of Jesus. Peter concludes that the Gentiles have received the same Spirit of God that he and his Jewish brothers and sisters had received and asks those traveling with him, "Is there any reason why we should not baptize these people as fellow disciples?" This is Peter asking his Jewish brethren, "Aren't these people our brothers and sisters, too?" Everyone agrees, and Cornelius and his household—the outsiders, the enemies—are baptized into the family of God.

What happened to the mountain? Why didn't Peter feel compelled to defend his God against the Roman enemy? Shouldn't Peter have stood his ground and refused to even consider the point of view of a member of the same army that literally oppressed him, his family, his people—that tortured and crucified Jesus? Did Peter forget? Did he choose to ignore? Or was something else going on?

¹⁸N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part One* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 168.



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION NINE DIALOGUE GUIDE: I AM SUPPOSED TO PROTECT AND DEFEND GOD AND MY - PT. 2

Handouts:

- "To Whom Am I Listening?" (pp. 128-130 of Faith Lies)
- "What Am I Hearing?" (pp. 140-141 of Faith Lies)
- "How Should I Listen?" (pp. 130-133 of Faith Lies)
- "Moving Mountains" (pp. 145-146 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence - Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

"We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone."

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “To Whom Am I Listening?” (pp. 128-130 of Faith Lies)

- How does it feel to consider the possibility that God might call you beyond your understanding? Beyond your righteousness? Beyond the Bible?
 - Share a transformational experience that turned your understanding of scripture or God or faith upside down.

HANDOUT: “How Should I Listen?” (pp. 130-133 of Faith Lies)

- Where do you see God inviting you beyond your present understanding?
- What does it look like to apply “clarity comes in the living” to that situation?

HANDOUT: “What Am I Hearing?” (pp. 140-141 of Faith Lies)

- Which biblical stories do you currently find the most helpful for making sense of your story?
- What stories outside of the Bible do you find helpful

HANDOUT: “Moving Mountains” (pp. 145-146 of Faith Lies)

- Following reading, move to a guided “Wrestling with the scroll” exercise.

TABLE / RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to respond to the “Moving Mountains” reading by writing about a relationship, situation, pain, or issue they are currently facing that seems like an impossible mountain to move. Leader(s) should allow 5 minutes for this exercise. As participants add to their parchment scrolls, the leaders can play the “God Who Moves the Mountains” music video in the background. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3xsn6db2il>

Participants are invited to roll their scrolls up and return them to the basket. As each participant places their scroll in the basket, the other members are invited to say,

**“Tell this mountain to move,
and it will move.”**

SENDING

Blessing or Benediction

After all the scrolls are returned, the Leader(s) read from Mark 11:12-14, 20-25.

End with:

The story of God told for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies “Chapter 5” pages 147 – 161.

FAITH LIES

Session Nine Handout

TO WHOM AM I LISTENING?

As Peter processes the dreams he had on the roof in Joppa and moves through an eye-opening experience with Cornelius, the first question he is forced to face is “To whom am I listening?” Whose voice am I following here? Is it my voice? Is it the voice of other people? By the time Peter gets to the story presented in Acts 10, he has learned that he needs to be listening to God. Peter has learned that he can’t trust his own sources by themselves to reveal God’s will; he needs to check them with God. In fact, Peter’s dreams teach him that even his religion by itself can mislead him. If you will forgive the shameless integrated book plug, Peter confronts the reality of faith lies.

Let’s be honest. Peter didn’t just refuse the animals on the sheet on a whim. His religion—the laws of which were from the Scripture—taught him that those animals were unclean and were not to be eaten. The instructions Peter was following were from Torah! Have you ever found yourself in a place where you felt you were standing on biblical principle? That is exactly what Peter is doing when he refuses to take and eat. Peter essentially says, “I will not eat any of these animals because the Bible tells me not to.” That is a totally reasonable response—some would even say it is a righteous response. Yet God invites Peter to something more. God invites Peter to see beyond the limits of the rules—to see beyond his religion, his upbringing, his culture.

Now, I want to be really clear on this point. God does not dismiss the law, and God does not contradict God. The Deuteronomic laws Peter was following by not eating unclean animals were given to the people of God by God. God is not saying, “My bad ... got that one wrong.” God is saying, “Let’s not make the instructions that help you live into rules that blind us and oppress us.” The Deuteronomic laws, which include what we call “the ten commandments,” were just that—instructions. They were instructions on how to live life well from a God who not only wants that for all people but has the capacity to see and understand things people cannot. What happens to Peter happens throughout the scriptures. The instructions become laws. The instructions become idols, which means they become the thing instead of given by the thing. The instructions—rules, laws, commandments—become a replacement for God. People, like Peter, replace relationship with regulations.

Friends, I wish I could put this more delicately, but the reality is we need to keep this truth before us at all times. It is incredibly arrogant and dangerous to assume at any point that we have our God or our faith “figured out” and that we are now ready to stand firm for our interpretation. When we assume that our understanding of God, the Bible, faith, or even Jesus is complete, we stand in the most ignorant posture of our lives. All manner of evil and foolish behavior has been executed under the belief that somehow we have mastered what God wants and are ready to defend God’s ideas. We can never stop receiving input from God. We can never put our fingers in our ears like a child and say, “No more. I got it.” We, like Peter, have to stay open to new information. We have to remain open to the possibility that we have not yet experienced or understood all there is to experience or understand. We must keep asking ourselves, “To whom am I listening?”

FAITH LIES

Session Nine Handout

HOW SHOULD I LISTEN?

If the first question we learn to ask from the story of Peter and Cornelius is “To whom am I listening?”, then I think the second question we learn to ask is, “How should I listen?” How do we actually pull it off? How do I make sure that I am receiving what God is saying? The simple answer seems to be gradually and obediently. I say simple because it is not complex. It is, however, by no means easy. Gradually and obediently?! Really? That sounds like slowly and with discipline ... boring and hard. These are not concepts that blend with our contemporary culture. But before you tune out and, like me, assume that you could never do something gradually and obediently, let’s take a look at Peter and Cornelius and see what this really means.

As we mentioned before, Peter did not instantly understand that God was calling him to move beyond his religion. The stories of Peter show that he moves toward this understanding gradually and through a series of experiences. This wasn’t even the first time Peter had received a divine invitation to take a step beyond his own understanding. Peter was the one whom Jesus invited out of the boat to walk on the water. Remember “Get behind me Satan!” and “Put your sword away!”? These are signposts of Peter’s progressive apprehension—or gradually developing understanding. And friends, please remember these are just the greatest hits. These stories don’t represent all of Peter’s experiences. These are just the moments that were so important that they were recorded and remembered. Just like the rest of us, Peter had a lifetime of experiences leading him toward understanding.

Peter’s unfolding understanding does not mean that there were never lightning-bolt moments. We all hopefully experience lightning-bolt moments in our lives where we feel as though we have instantly come to a new understanding or appreciation. Those moments have certainly happened to me. But I am learning that those lightning-bolt moments usually come after a series of experiences. They may seem like isolated moments at the time, but the truth is they are connected to previous experiences. While it may feel to us like an instant moment of lightning, more often than not we can look back and see a series of events that led us out into an open field in a thunderstorm, holding a lightning rod to the sky.

That is what happened to Peter. Throughout his time following Yeshua, he was making a journey toward the lightning-bolt moment he has at the home of Cornelius. Still not convinced? Let’s look at what Peter’s story records in the events leading up to the lightning strike.

- The Gospel accounts record Peter receiving correction from Yeshua on three different occasions for essentially trying to defend and protect God. (Matt. 16, John 13, Matt. 26/John 18)
- Probably more so than any other disciple, Peter finds ways to mess up and miss the point while following Yeshua. He eventually denies knowing Yeshua three times, as was predicted.
- Throughout his years following Yeshua—including being a witness to the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Yeshua—Peter receives grace, love, forgiveness, and acceptance.

- While waiting on the rooftop for lunch in Joppa, Peter has the same dream three times telling him not to call unclean or profane that which God has made.
- Peter awakens and has to think about the dream. The text even says that it confuses him. (Acts 10:17)
- Three men are sent to retrieve Peter, and the text says the Holy Spirit has to encourage him to go with them to see Cornelius. (Acts 10:19–20)
- Peter goes to Caesarea to see Cornelius and listens to the story about why Cornelius has sent for him.
- Peter testifies about Yeshua to Cornelius and his household and, while doing so, witnesses the Spirit of God being poured out on them just as it had been poured out among the Jews weeks before. (Acts 2)

Then he gets it. After all of that, the lightning strikes, and Peter awakens to a new understanding that he is being invited to partner with God in extending to this household of outsiders the very same grace, love, forgiveness, and acceptance he himself had received. It had been years of experience. Peter had followed Yeshua around the Galilee and listened to every teaching—seizing opportunities to stick his foot in his mouth. He had missed the point of this very lightning bolt several times. But gradually, he is moved to a place where he can receive it. The totality of his journey lands him in the open field of Cornelius' home during a “Holy Spirit” thunderstorm, and as he begins to testify about his rabbi, he raises a lightning rod to the sky and BAM! Lightning strikes.

Lightning strikes because Peter was willing to keep listening. Lightning strikes because Peter didn't close himself off and determine that he had learned all he needed to learn. Peter never wore a t-shirt that said, “All I needed to learn I learned in Hebrew school.” He listened gradually.

Theologian Robert Wall wrote, “The process of getting on the same page with God is frequently confusing, profoundly dependent upon others and often takes considerable time.” My rabbi, David McNitzky, says it this way, “Clarity comes in the living.” If we want to understand something— if we really want to get something inside of us, we must be willing to live it out.

FAITH LIES

Session Nine Handout

WHAT AM I HEARING?

The third question the story of Peter and Cornelius teaches us to ask is “What am I hearing?” Does what I am hearing sound like God? Is it consistent with what God has already revealed or said? Is it consistent with the overarching story of God?

Naturally, in order to answer these questions, we need to be familiar with what God sounds like. We will be unable to measure consistency with the overarching story if we do not know the overarching story. Learning that overarching story of God begins with the biblical stories. Peter knew those stories. In all likelihood, Peter knew the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) from memory—much as any good rabbinic disciple of that time would have.

What does that mean? It means that as Peter walked on his journey to Caesarea trying to make sense of why God would send him to a Roman centurion, he had God’s overarching story bouncing around inside of him. Peter knew that God had promised Abraham that “all the families of the Earth will be blessed through you”—not just the Jewish families but all the families (Gen. 12). Peter knew that the prophet Zechariah had declared that all the nations of the earth would celebrate the feast of Sukkot together for eternity—not just the Jewish nation but all nations (Zech. 14). Peter knew the story of Jonah—a prophet who was sent to a city full of pagans in Nineveh to urge them to repent and be in relationship with God (Jon. 1). Peter saw a pattern of God reaching toward people in relationship throughout the biblical story.

Peter also knew his own story—a story that included walking after Jesus as a disciple. While these passages were not in Peter’s scriptures (they had not yet been written), he knew them nonetheless. Jesus had taught him that salvation would come through the Jewish people—not just for the Jews but for the entire world (John 4). Peter had been given a new commandment by Jesus to “love one another” that the world would know Peter was a follower of Jesus by his love (John 13).

It is impossible to gain familiarity with the overarching story without the biblical stories. Yet, knowing the overarching story does not simply mean knowing the stories of the Bible. The biblical narrative is not the totality of God’s story. The story did not end in the third century when the biblical canon was closed. God still moves. God still speaks. God still intercedes in our lives. The story continues.

To know the overarching story of God requires that we know the stories of the Bible, but it also requires that we know other stories ... the stories of other people ... stories other than our own. Peter knew the stories of many other people who had encountered God. As a disciple, he had watched in person as hundreds—if not thousands—of people brought their stories to his rabbi, Jesus. In Acts 10, we get to observe as Peter learns the story of a God-fearing Roman centurion named Cornelius. We watch as Peter connects the dots and sees the overarching story. We witness Peter recognizing that the divine desire has always been to transcend and include, seeing past the mountain that separates and moving into loving relationship.

As Peter asks, “What am I hearing?”, he brings God’s story into focus and in doing so, is able to make sense out of the story that is happening before him and to him. That’s the thing about knowing other stories: they give our story context. When we know God’s cosmic story and consider the stories of those around us, our stories make a whole lot more sense. When our story exists in isolation—as if it is the only story that matters, we have no bearing, no direction, and we are easily lost.

FAITH LIES

Session Nine Handout

MOVING MOUNTAINS

I bet you can bring to mind a relationship, a situation, a pain, or an issue right now that seems like an impossible mountain to move. We can all summon up a viewpoint on which we would bet the farm—an idea or belief that we would be willing to fight for unto the death. We can imagine no reason or eventuality that would ever cause us to waver or surrender the ground upon which we stand so firm. As the mountain rises up, we feel we must be true. We must defend our idea, our belief, our faith, our God. After all, if we surrender, what will happen to us? We've built our lives around this mountain.

Hear these words. Read them out loud:

“Put down your sword. Return it to its sheath.”

The mountains that stand between you and another person or people group are a barrier, and the truth is, those mountains should not be there—no matter how they got there. As people of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we are called to move mountains. As hard as that may seem, that is exactly what God invites us to do—to remove those barriers that stand between us and other people. Within each one of us dwells the divine creative power to repair—to bring restoration and wholeness.

Each fractured relationship and broken person is an opportunity to breathe love and speak life—to introduce shalom where chaos lies—and move mountains. Don't get me wrong: I find that just as overwhelming as you do.

But here's the good news: we don't do it alone. We have the stories—like that of Peter and Cornelius—to guide us. We have each other to strengthen and encourage us. And we have a partner in the One who made the mountains. The One who said, “With a mere kernel of faith the size of a mustard seed, you can tell this mountain to move” ... and it will move.



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION TEN DIALOGUE GUIDE: THERE IS ONE RIGHT WAY TO BELIEVE AND ONE RIGHT WAY TO BEHAVE - PART 1

Handouts:

- "They Are We...We Are They" (pp. 147-151 of Faith Lies)
- "Awakening" (pp. 152-157 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence - Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

"We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone."

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “They Are We...We Are They” (pp. 147-151 of Faith Lies)

- How do the words orthodoxy and orthopraxy make you feel? What thoughts do these words trigger for you?
- How does considering the possibility that there might be more than “one right way” affect you?

HANDOUT: “Awakening” (pp. 152-157 of Faith Lies)

Before reading, watch the “Going Clear: Scientology” clip on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YJ-H0iut_E

- How have you experienced “crushing certainty”?
- What metrics or measurable data have helped you process or wrestle with your faith?
- How have you experienced “awakening”?

TABLE / RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to read the contents of the scroll they have and either:

- Respond to one of the “faith lies” already on the scroll or
- Write about an experience of “crushing certainty” or an experience of “awakening” from their own lives.

Leader(s) should allow 4 minutes for this exercise. As participants add to their parchment scrolls, the leaders can play the “When You Awake” music video in the background: www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=189&v=QZrgBpr_Jzk

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer a blessing or benediction to the participants as the basket is passed around for the collection of the participants’ scrolls.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies “Chapter 5” pages 162 – 172.

FAITH LIES

Session Ten Handout

THEY ARE WE...WE ARE THEY

Let me ask you a few questions. Are Orthodox Jews more right than Reform Jews? Is Christianity more right than Judaism? Is Catholicism more right than Protestantism? Is one Protestant denomination more right than the rest? Is baptism by immersion more correct than baptism by sprinkling? Does a Greek Orthodox worship service provide access to the divine that a Baptist worship service does not? Is there one correct way to observe communion? Are certain methods of prayer more right and true than others?

By this point in this journey, you are much too savvy to answer yes to any of those questions because you know it's a setup. Nevertheless, I am guessing that thinking through those questions and not being able to give a resolute answer might make you uncomfortable. We can probably all think of people who could answer those questions with resounding certainty. We may even be those people. I certainly have Orthodox Jewish friends who believe that their embrace of the Jewish faith is truer than that of their Reform brothers and sisters. Likewise, I have Catholic friends who are convinced that all Protestants must return to the Mother Church and Protestant friends who sit in judgment of the Catholic Church. In my hometown, it is easy to find someone who "knows" a certain mode of baptism is the only true baptism—or that a specific style of worship is God's preferred style.

All of these questions and thoughts can be summed up with two words: orthodoxy—correct belief and orthopraxy—correct behavior and practice. We're all familiar with the *ortho* part of these words, right? It is a Greek prefix that simply means "right, correct, or straight." We probably use it most commonly when talking about orthopedics—the study of the musculoskeletal system where doctors concern themselves with keeping our bodies "right, correct, or straight" or orthodontics—the study of improper bites due to tooth and jaw irregularities. Orthodontists help us get our teeth and our jaws "right, correct, and straight."

Following that line of thinking may make us wonder if there are orthodoxologists and orthopraxologists out there concerning themselves with keeping the beliefs and the practices of our faiths "right, correct, and straight." But we don't wonder long because we know the answer, don't we? Yes ... they're out there. They are everywhere. They are in every church, synagogue, and mosque. They are in the schools, offices, and boardrooms of our lives. Most likely they are even in our homes—looking back at us in the mirror. They are we ... we are they.

Whether we admit it or not, we answer or avoid the kinds of questions drummed up by orthodoxy and orthopraxy every day. What do we believe? How do we behave? The nightly news always contains stories of some group of people somewhere fighting or defending a religious or spiritual principle. Those people—just like most of us—have arrived at an interpretive decision. They have decided that the "right, correct, and straight" version of their faith requires them to believe something, do something, defend something, refuse something, and in the most tragic but all-too-common expression, to attack something.

Now, I get it. Most of us reading this book have not made the evening news because of our stance on orthodoxy or orthopraxy. Yet, every single one of us is affected by this unending and ubiquitous argument. Pick a topic—any topic: creation, evolution, abortion, birth control, homosexuality, global warming, genetic manipulation, stem cell research, capital punishment, or corporal punishment. And friends, let's be honest—those are just a few of the media-rich topics that fill our newscasts and public

debate. There are much more mundane and everyday-life topics that don't always make the news but cause us to question which way is the "right" way—things like sex, drinking, drug use, dancing, and movie ratings. On top of all that, many of us are also confronted with the overtly and specifically religious questions about what clothing is appropriate, what the correct gender roles are, what food is okay to eat, what words are too bad to speak, and what constitutes working on the Sabbath.

Are you starting to grasp the prevalence of the *ortho* conversation? It is impossible to escape these questions. We use these issues to divide up the world. We group ourselves formally in religions, political parties, neighborhoods, churches, and schools based on decisions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. We want to be around those who believe and behave like we do—those who will affirm for us that we are "right, correct, and straight" in our thinking and activity. Even in informal groupings with our friends and social connections, we align ourselves with people whose "right way" looks like ours. And don't think that by rejecting religion altogether we can somehow remain above the fray. The rejection of religion is still an interpretive choice of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Rejecting religion is yet another method of defining our "right way." We all decide where our plumb line or our true north is, and we follow it as best we can.

Many of us rely on other people—both the living and the dead—to help us determine where the "right way" is. Some of us look to the Scripture, the stories of those who have gone before us, and the wisdom of the ancients. Some Americans look to the laws of our land, the Constitution, and the history of our government to define what is "right, correct, and straight." Those labeled as mystics seem to rely on things like prayer, revelation, and the direction of the Spirit to better understand a path that is true. Some of us reject it all and just follow our gut—what feels right. So which is it? Who is right? What is the best way to determine what is orthodoxy and orthopraxy? How do we know what is the right thing to believe and the right way to behave?

Before we struggle to answer that question, let me suggest that our problem may be that we misunderstand orthodoxy and orthopraxy—that we have completely missed the point of *ortho* altogether. What if *ortho* didn't mean that "one right way" exists? What if, instead, *ortho* meant right ways—plural?

What if *ortho* was simply a record of those things that had been discovered to work or to be helpful? What if *ortho* was a growing and evolving list of those things that had been tried and found to be "right, correct, and straight?"

FAITH LIES

Session Ten Handout

AWAKENING

Author Lawrence Wright—explaining why he has done extensive research across different religious traditions—stated, “I was interested in intelligent and skeptical people who are drawn into a belief system and wind up acting on those beliefs in ways they never thought they would.” While I can certainly identify with Wright’s driving interest, I have to confess that I have acted in ways I never thought I would because of my belief system—or more specifically, the lies of my faith. Yet, here is the gut punch. In describing the commonality among those whom he studied, Wright states, “They’re oftentimes good-hearted people—idealistic—but full of a kind of crushing certainty that eliminates doubt.”¹⁹

That stings a bit, doesn’t it? I know he’s right. I have lived that way. I have crushed things with my certainty. Ideas, hopes, conversations, arguments, even people—they have all been subject to the crushing certainty of my orthodoxy and orthopraxy before. I have ignored nuance. I have refused to see shades of gray and instead believed certain areas or issues to be only black or white. I have hidden under the lie of Chapter 3—the lie of dualism—that everything has a good side and a bad side, a right way and a wrong way. Wright is describing me. I sure hope I have been “good-hearted and idealistic” because I have walked in crushing certainty and eliminated doubt.

There have been plenty of times when my fear of believing the wrong thing, my desire to feel the supposed safety of being certain, has caused me to avoid doubt at all costs and behave as though I knew I was absolutely right. None of us want to give our lives to the wrong thing. We do not want to get to the end and find out that we did it all wrong. Such thoughts fill us with fear.

And what have we learned that we humans do when we are filled with fear? We seek to control. So, give us some time—let’s say a few thousand years, and every time we face the fear that we might not have God, or faith, or spirituality, or religion figured out right—we do something about it. Sometimes, we do good things, like move past the fear and learn from our mistakes. We continue to add to our ever-changing, ever-growing understanding of God and our relationship with God and each other. We begin archives of beliefs and practices that seem to be helpful and formative. We write down those ideas and behaviors that move us toward relationship and freedom. We develop orthodoxy and orthopraxy—not as the “one right way”—but as a documentation of hard-earned wisdom gained through experience, pain, and growth.

Still, other times we let fear govern our actions and our thoughts. Instead of moving past our fear, we steer into it and look for ways to control it. If our fears have to do with getting God wrong, or getting faith wrong, or even worse—someone else getting God or faith wrong—then we build constructs of control. Rules, regulations, expectations, standards, disciplines—things that can be cataloged and measured. We codify and regulate what a relationship with God should look like. We say, “Here is what you should believe about God, and this is how you should behave.” Although the writer of Hebrews defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen,” we tend to prefer things we can know and things we can see. In the face of fear, we often prefer the assurance and conviction of our faith to rest on empirical data or measurable facts. We are especially fond of empirical data and measurable facts. We like to know that we are right and have proof to back it up. Reports, statistics, eyewitness accounts—all dedicated to helping us feel we are making the right choice when we choose to have faith, to believe, to base our lives upon something. Ever striving for security, we build

constructs around our faith that give them the illusion of measurement.

What does that even mean—the illusion of measurement? It means we want to know and believe that we are giving our life to the “right” thing. The last thing we would want is to be duped into professing our faith in the “wrong” thing. We want to be sure that we are giving our heart, our soul, and our strength to the true God—the true religion—the true faith. Accordingly, we construct ways to measure what is true. We determine standards, set bars, and make rules in order to provide a basis for comparison—a basis for measurement. We find comfort in the ability to measure and compare because it feels like the safety of control in a chaotic and uncertain world.

If I can find a “right” way, I can measure my actions or efforts against that guide and judge the results. I succeeded. I failed. I was so close. I missed it by “that much,” so here are the things I need to work on. We determine all of that by measurement and comparison. Once more, we find measuring and judging the success and failure of others against the “right” way even more fascinating. It is incredibly satisfying to establish a norm or an accepted standard that I can keep or achieve and then sit comfortably and included while determining who is not able to achieve it or keep up the standard.

In his book *Against Football: One Fan's Reluctant Manifesto*, Steve Almond writes about the human propensity to set such standards as a way of distancing ourselves from the realities we create and accept. Dealing with his ability to deflect any personal responsibility he felt as a paying fan of football for the traumatic brain injuries incurred by the players, Almond writes,

I assumed, in other words, a posture of ironic distance, which is what we Americans do to avoid the corruption of our spiritual arrangements. Ironic distance allows us to separate ourselves from the big, complicated moral systems around us (political, religious, familial), to sit in judgment of others rather than ourselves. It's the reason, as we zoom into the twilight years of our imperial reign, that Reality TV has become our designated guilty pleasure.

But here's the thing: You can run from your own subtext for only so long. Those spray-tanned lunatics we happily revile are merely turned-out versions of our private selves, the whores we hide from public view.²⁰

If you don't feel the sting of Almond's conclusion, go back and read it again. That should hit home. Whether or not you are a football fan, we should all see ourselves in that quote. We all have areas where we “run from our own subtext,” judging others and denying the existence of the whorish self that “we hide from public view.” I know that sucks to think about, but remember that you are not alone. We all do this—and when I say all, I don't mean football fans, or Americans, or even those of us who are alive at present. I mean all of humanity—since the beginning. Can you imagine what a life would look like if it did not fall prey to the “illusion of measurement” or “ironic distance?” Can you picture a life lived without fear—the fear of believing the wrong thing, the fear of acting the wrong way? Hold that thought.

Whether we realize it or not, we all struggle with fear. We all engage the illusion of measurement and assume postures of ironic distance. The thoughts, questions, conversations, and decisions about orthodoxy and orthopraxy that fill our lives cause us to pursue the false safety of control and separation. It is a lifestyle of spinning plates on the tips of sticks—never-ending, stressful, exhausting. Trying to determine “right way” for every belief and situation is an overwhelming task in and of itself. But once we feel we have determined the rules and regulations, we set about the endless work trying to keep everything in our world in line. Trying to keep our lives parallel to any plumb line takes a lot of energy—and what if the plumb line keeps changing?

Wait, what was that last sentence? Our plumb line changes? How could that be? Shouldn't our orthodoxy and orthopraxy get set and be still? What would cause it to change?

This is another one of those questions to which you already know the answer. The answer is life. Life causes our plumb lines to change. Life alters our perception of where true north really is. Life sizes up our walls of orthodoxy and orthopraxy—sometimes giving them a gentle nudge or realignment and sometimes completely leveling them. Right at the moment I usually think I have figured out what is “right, correct, and straight,” a situation arises in my life that makes me realize I don't have it figured out at all. In essence, I awaken to a new question, a different perspective, or a level of understanding that I did not have before. Awaken is an important word; it's an important concept for us to remember when dealing with the lie of “one right way.” Make a mental note of that—highlight it, underline it, whatever works for you. What if, instead of believing there is “one right way” to learn and apply, we viewed our faith in terms of a continually expanding consciousness to which we awaken?

¹⁹ Alex Gibney and Lawrence Wright, *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief*, Directed by Alex Gibney (Los Angeles, CA: HBO Documentary Films, 2015).

²⁰ Steve Almond, *Against Football: One Fan's Reluctant Manifesto* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2014), 4-5



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION ELEVEN DIALOGUE GUIDE: THERE IS ONE RIGHT WAY TO BELIEVE AND ONE RIGHT WAY TO BEHAVE - PART 2

Handouts:

- "The Myth of the Singular Precedent" (pp. 162-164 of Faith Lies)
- "The Context of Faith" (pp. 164-171 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence - Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

"We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone."

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “The Myth of the Singular Precedent” (pp. 162-164 of Faith Lies)

Watch the “A History of Christian Worship” clip on YouTube as prompted:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Lhp33zrCzo>

- If we accept that there was no single “early church” to which all of our ideas and practices can be traced, how does that make us feel about orthodoxy? How does that make us feel about our traditions?
 - What is the right way to baptize?

HANDOUT: “The Context of Faith” (pp. 164-171 of Faith Lies)

- Has anyone ever reduced your faith to a rule or a set of rules? How did that make you feel?
- What instructions or guidelines have you found helpful in your spiritual journey?

TABLE / RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to read the contents of the scroll they have and either:

- Respond to one of the “faith lies” already on the scroll or
- Write about a rule, instruction, commandment, or guideline that you would like to lay down—something in your orthodoxy and orthopraxy that you do not experience as developing your relationship with God or other people.

Leader(s) should allow 5 minutes for this exercise. As participants add to their parchment scrolls, the leaders can play the “Crack the Case” music video in the background. www.youtube.com/watch?v=NISsg7mK9cw

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer a blessing or benediction to the participants as the basket is passed around for the collection of the participants’ scrolls.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies “Chapter 6” pages 173 – 193.

FAITH LIES

Session Eleven Handout

THE MYTH OF THE SINGULAR PRECEDENT

Here's a question: In the face of increasing pluralism...or humanism...or universalism...aren't we supposed to be strong?

- Aren't we supposed to drive toward the standard?
- Isn't our society today just evidence of our continuing moral decay?
- Haven't we lost our way?
- Shouldn't we try to be more like the people in the biblical stories?
- Wouldn't it be best if we returned to the ways of the early church?
- Aren't those the standards we should espouse and to which we should hold ourselves accountable?

Okay, in all fairness, that was more like seven questions...but consider this answer:

“Which one?”

Which standard in the past is the right one? Which of the “good old days” are the real “good old days” to which we should return and hold fast? The singular precedent—that one benchmark of excellence somewhere in the past—that does not exist in the way that we think it does. If we think we need to return to the ways of the “early church” or the “first century faith,” we have an impossible task ahead of us. Even if we could convince Doc Brown to throw us in the time machine and take us back, we would find that there simply was not one “early church.” There were several.

At the time when Jesus and the disciples were walking around the Sea of Galilee, there were at least eleven different sects of Judaism. Following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the missionary efforts of Paul and the disciples spread the story of the Messiah around the region, but that story didn't manifest itself in a singular expression. Duke University professor Dr. Lester Ruth says it this way: “We really shouldn't speak about worship of the ‘Early Church’; we should speak about worship of the ‘Early Churches.’ What you're looking at in the first century is a rapidly expanding missionary movement—crossing a variety of people groups and geographic regions and cultures—and that's just a formula for diversity, not uniformity.”²¹

None of this should seem strange to Christians, who now have over 30,000 distinct denominations around the world. There has never been one universally recognized “right way” of living, expressing, or understanding the faith.

Case in point—baptism—something that some Christian denominations can get really bent out of shape over. People have been arguing about baptism for a long time. Who can be baptized? When do we baptize? How do we baptize? Can we rebaptize? What does baptism do? Today, there is surprisingly little agreement on the answers to any of these questions. So who has it right? Who has the orthodoxy and orthopraxy when it comes to baptism? Who is holding on to what is “right, correct, and straight?”

Watch the YouTube clip:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Lhp33zrCzo>

Worship and liturgical scholar John D. Witvliet of the Calvin Institute for Worship points out that archeologists have unearthed first century baptismal fonts in varying locations that demonstrate differing understandings of baptism.

There are early baptismal fonts that look like washbasins—and that makes sense as the waters of baptism, in part, convey meaning to us as a symbol of cleaning ... some early church fonts look instead like tombs. They are cut out of the ground and that makes sense, too, if in Scripture, we remember the powerful imagery of how baptism is for us a chance to identify with Christ's death and resurrection.... There are even some early church fonts that resemble wombs ... the texts associated with these fonts very clearly suggests the image of a womb—and that makes sense, too. There are New Testament texts that speak about the waters of rebirth. So, water for washing, for drowning and for birthing, and fonts that correspond with each of these scriptural images—it's really remarkable to see the early churches' imagination at work.²²

I have to admit that allowing imagination room to work seems much more interesting to me than isolating one "right way" to baptize.

I was baptized in a particular way—water was sprinkled on my head three times—in the washbasin sense mentioned above. That has meaning for me. I can connect to the fact that I am cleansed in the waters of baptism. I can trace the connection of my baptism to the Jewish mikvah or ritual cleansing—the tradition from which Christian baptism springs. At the same time, the idea of descending down into a tomblike pool and being resurrected from beneath the waters sounds pretty awesome to me. Likewise, the picture of being born again out of a womblike baptismal font seems incredibly consistent with the story of God. So, which is it? Which way is the right way to baptize? Which way is the orthodox way?

²¹ Lester Ruth, quoted in "Part 2: The Body" of *A History of Christian Worship: Ancient Ways, Future Paths*, DVD, directed by Tom Dallis (Worcester, PA: Ensign Media, 2010).

²² John D. Witvliet, quoted in "Part 2: The Body" of *A History of Christian Worship: Ancient Ways, Future Paths*, DVD, directed by Tom Dallis (Worcester, PA: Ensign Media, 2010).

FAITH LIES

Session Eleven Handout

THE CONTEXT OF FAITH

The basic problem of misunderstanding orthodoxy and orthopraxy as the pursuit and preservation of “one right way” is that it sets the context of our faith as rules. At this point, you may be thinking, *Ummmm ... duh, Faith is about rules.*

We all understand this narrative, don't we? It is the narrative that sees faith as a contract between God and us. That contract stipulates what it is that is expected of us—the codes and rules that we are supposed to follow. If we follow those rules and keep up our end of the bargain, then we will be blessed—with a better life now and with a heavenly afterlife. If we fail to follow the rules and honor our contractual agreements, then we can expect punishment and a torturous, hellish afterlife.

To be sure, that is a boiled-down description that most of faithful people would not choose to describe their faith. But when we elevate rules as our spiritual context, that is exactly what faith becomes. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy become the rules by which we are all measured and judged as being faithful or unfaithful—as being worthy or unworthy—as being heaven-bound or cursed to hell. If this seems too harsh of a light to shine on our faith, we must ask ourselves how we actually define the different faiths or denominations to which we have been exposed. Most of us—if we are honest—classify and group the different faiths and denominations in our world based on what those faiths believe to be *ortho*—what they believe to be the “one right way.” We learn what their rules are and use those rules to define their faith. For example:

- “Southern Baptists can't drink alcohol or smoke or (until very recently) dance.”
- “Jews can't eat pork or shellfish.”
- “Mormons can't drink caffeine.”
- “Catholics have to go to confession.”
- “Muslims have to pray five times a day.”
- “The Church of Christ doesn't allow musical instruments in worship.”

None of these statements are completely true in the sense that they accurately describe what is going on in each of those faiths, but they are exactly the kind of divisions we make in our spiritual world when we define the context of faith as rules.

The effects of this warped context are ubiquitous and ancient. This is not a new or localized phenomenon—it's everywhere, and it has been for a long time. Perceiving faith as being about rules—as being about “one right way”—shapes our world. Contextualizing faith with rules necessarily requires us to build and sustain extensive systems of measurements and judgment.

But we don't stop with just the rules. We must also have scholars and experts in understanding and keeping the rules—writing and arguing through codes and discipline. We have pastors and priests to sit in judgment as to how well the rules are being followed, deciding whether we are worthy to engage the sacraments or receive the blessing. We require systems of enforcement, punishment, and repentance that try to bring order to our behavior when we fail to follow the rules.

As bad as that may sound, the reduction of our faith to an infrastructure of measurement, judgment, and punishment is not the worst effect rules have on us when we see them as the context for our relationship with God. The truth is when we make our faith about *ortho*—about knowing and keeping the rules—we make God smaller. In my opinion, we make God so small that the result is not God at all—it is an idol. I readily admit that if all God has to offer me is a list of rules—things that I must do and must not do in order to be blessed—then God becomes the hall monitor of creation. With all deference to those of you who dutifully served in the position of hall monitor in your schools growing up, nobody wants to hang out with the hall monitor—at least, not while they're in the hall.

None of this is to say that rules, laws, commandments are inherently bad ... quite to the contrary. Rules, like hall monitors, are important. They can help to bring order and create healthy boundaries. When our orthodoxy and orthopraxy are seen as the accumulated wisdom of the faithful living out their relationship with God and each other—those beliefs and practices the faithful have tried and determined to be helpful—then rules can seek to protect and preserve. Such a perspective is not about control and judgment; it is about relationship and edification.

Richard Rohr wrote, "This tendency in religion to 'absolutize' things comes from a deep psychological need for some solid ground to stand on, and I understand that. But what the prophets keep saying is, 'God is the only absolute!' Don't make the fingers pointing to the moon into the moon itself, as it were."²³

Are the rules, the instructions, the commandments the moon or are they the finger that points to the moon? It's the same question we must ask of our denominational doctrines, our books of discipline, our rules of the faith. It is the x-ray under which all of our orthodoxy and all of our orthopraxy must be examined. What is at the center? If we peel away all the layers from our "right beliefs" and "right practices," do we find helpful guides for progressive and growing relationship? If we hold our orthodoxy and orthopraxy up to the light, do we find instruction that can be filed under the principles of loving God or loving others? For those of us who find orthodoxy and orthopraxy to be a terrifyingly amorphous abyss, this question makes it really simple.

Does this instruction—this guideline, this rule—help me to develop my relationship with God or with another human being?

If the answer is *no*, then we must have the courage to lay such ideas down and leave them behind.

²³ Richard Rohr, Prophets: Self Critical Thinking, Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, accessed February 17, 2015, <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation-Archetypal-Religion.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=JJ-SgyYu2H0>



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION TWELVE DIALOGUE GUIDE: FAITH IS A PRIVATE MATTER

Handouts:

- "We Come From Community" (pp. 177-182 of Faith Lies)
- "We Need Community" (pp. 182-186 of Faith Lies)
- "Community Needs Us" (pp. 187-189 of Faith Lies)
- "Community is Not Optional" (pp. 190-193 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence – Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

"We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone."

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “We Come From Community” (pp. 177-182 of Faith Lies)

- How does tzimtzum—or the idea that God contracted or constricted Godself to make a space for us—make you feel?
- How does perichoresis—or the idea that God is a spinning dance of relationship that dances around us—make you feel??

HANDOUT: “We Need Community” (pp. 182-186 of Faith Lies)

- Does the idea that we need to know someone else before we can know ourselves ring true for you? Why or why not?

HANDOUT: “Community Needs Us” (pp. 187-189 of Faith Lies)

- How does it feel to consider the reality that your community need you—that it will not be all it is called to be without you?

HANDOUT: “Community is Not Optional” (pp. 190-193 of Faith Lies)

- What parts of your faith do you feel are off-limits to others? Why?

TABLE/RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to read the contents of the scroll they have and either:

- Respond to one of the “faith lies” already on the scroll or
- Write about an aspect of your faith or spiritual journey that has been off-limits or private—something you now understand is meant to be shared with the community you need and the community that needs you.

Leader(s) should allow 5 minutes for this exercise. As participants add to their parchment scrolls, the leaders can play the “Nobody Cries Alone” music video in the background: www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPxlifb48Yg

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer a blessing or benediction to the participants as the basket is passed around for the collection of the participants’ scrolls.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies “Chapter 7” pages 195 - 210.

FAITH LIES

Session Twelve Handout

WE COME FROM COMMUNITY

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....’” (GEN 1:26)

Verse 26 of the creation poem found in the first chapter of Genesis has God saying to God’s self, “Let US make humankind in OUR image, according to OUR likeness....” That is supremely weird. Who is God talking to? Don’t worry, I am not getting literal on you here. The poem in Genesis 1 doesn’t exist to provide us with empirical data on the creation of the cosmos. This poem—as poems generally do—points toward bigger ideas. One of those ideas is that God is not a created, singularly contained being—God is better understood as a relationship—and we come from that relationship.

Two terms are helpful in understanding this relationship that we call God. The first is perichoresis and the second is tzimtzum. Say what? You may be wondering if we have gotten to the point in the book where I just start making up words. I must confess that if you had met me five years ago and given me a million guesses at what two words best describe the communal relationship of God, I would never have come up with tzimtzum and perichoresis. Those are some goofy-looking words that we simply do not hear or say in real life. But I assure you that these words are real. In fact, they are really old words. They are words that the faithful have used for thousands of years to describe this mind-boggling relationship from which all things—including us—flow.

Let’s start with perichoresis—an ancient Greek compound word first used by early Christian church father Gregory Nazianzen in the fourth century.²⁴ Peri means “around” while chorein can be understood as “to contain” or “to make room for.” Theologians use big synonyms like “interpenetration” and “commingling” to explain perichoresis. The most helpful definition I have heard is that of “a spinning dance.” Move past all the scholarly stuff and try to take that in. God is a spinning dance of relationship. Yum.

That spinning dance has been a primary understanding for Christians, defining the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for over fifteen hundred years. It is, I think, a helpful idea that sees God as being the encompassing relational dance in which the Father is with and points us toward the Son and the Spirit, the Son is with and points us toward the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is with and points us toward the Father and the Son. In this loving relationship, each “contains” the other and each “makes room for” the other—and if that’s not enough to blow your mind, the whole thing spins “around.” Around what? That is a great question! Here is Jesus’ answer, according to John’s Gospel:

Father, may they all be one as You are in Me and I am in You; may they be in Us, for by this unity, the world will believe that You sent Me. All the glory You have given to Me, I pass on to them. May that glory unify them and make them one as We are one, I in them and You in Me, that they may be refined so that all will know that You sent Me, and You love them in the same way You love Me. Father, I long for the time when those You have given Me can join Me in My place so they may witness My glory, which comes from You. You have loved Me before the foundations of the cosmos were laid. Father, You are just; though this corrupt world order does not know You, I do. These followers know that You have sent Me—I have told them about Your

nature; and I will continue to speak of Your name in order that Your love, which was poured out on Me, will be in them. And I will also be in them.

(JOHN 17:21–26 VOICE)

The perichoresis spins around you! It spins around me! The loving, glorifying, interconnected relationship of God “makes room for” us.

Tzimtzum—meaning “contraction” or “constriction” in Hebrew—also aligns with the idea of God “making room” for relationship. You may have heard of Rob and Kristen Bell’s book, *The Zimzum of Love* (which, coincidentally, is how you pronounce tzimtzum—zimzum.) The Bells do a wonderful job of defining tzimzum and showing how it should inform our relationships.

Zimzum is a Hebrew word used in the rabbinic tradition to talk about the creation of the world—not in a scientific way but more like something somewhere between poetry and metaphysical speculation. Followers of this tradition began with the assumption that before there was anything, there was only God. The divine, they believed, was all that was. For something to exist other than God, then, God had to create space that wasn’t God.... Their contention was that for something to exist that wasn’t God, God had to contract or withdraw from a certain space so that something else, something other than God, could exist and thrive in that space. And the word they used for this divine contraction is zimzum.²⁵

Are you making the connection? Tzimtzum holds that the primary act of the divine was to create space—to make room—for another to thrive. That is an action of relationship. That is an action of community. The great theological and philosophical rock star Dallas Willard said it this way, “The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons, with Himself included in that community as its prime sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.”²⁶

We are not alone.

We are not supposed to be alone.

God made room for us.

Our existence finds its birth in the contraction of another.

God tzimtzum’ed so that we could be in relationship with God and each other.

God exists in a communal perichoretic dance—spinning around us in relationship.

We come from relationship.

We come from community.

²⁴ Oliver D. Crisp, “Problems with Perichoresis” *Tyndale Bulletin* (56.1: 2005) 122.

²⁵ Rob and Kristen Bell, *The Zimzum of Love: A New Way of Understanding Marriage* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2014), 18.

²⁶ Dallas Willard, as quoted by Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1998), 154.

FAITH LIES

Session Twelve Handout

WE NEED COMMUNITY

If we come from community, it stands to reason that we would likewise be designed to exist in community. God does not exist in perichoretical community so that we can exist in isolation. God did not tzimtzum so that we could be apart from God and each other. We are children of a relational parent. Relationship and community are in our DNA. We need community.

Pastor and author John Ortberg points out, “Adam’s fellowship with God was perfect, and God Himself declared Adam needed other humans.”²⁷ This, again, is referring to the creation poems of Genesis—specifically, the poem found in the second chapter. In that poem, after God creates Adam and places him in the garden, God says, “It is not good for the man to be alone, so I will create a companion for him, a perfectly suited partner” (Gen. 2:18 VCE).

It is not good for the man to be alone. Don’t miss the significance of that statement. I realize this is an incredible opportunity for all women to shout “Amen!” as you are all well aware of the many bad ideas men can generate when they are left alone, but that is not the point—at least, it is not the whole point. Up until now in the creation poems, everything that God has created has been “good.” Don’t miss that. In the first poem of Genesis 1, God creates the heavens above and the earth below, and they are good. God creates the dry land and the seas, and they are good. God creates the plants, vegetation, and trees of the earth, and they are good. God creates living creatures in the waters, on the land, in the skies, and they are all good. We move into the second poem found in Genesis 2, and God has created a garden in the east called “Eden—a place of utter delight” (Gen. 2:8 VCE), and everything in it was good. Then, the first thing that is not good shows up—“It is not good for man to be alone...” (Gen 2:18).

Once again, right out of the gates—in the poems that are meant to speak to us about who we are and who God is—we have an emphatic statement about relationship. It is not good for us to be alone. We are built for community. Hopefully, at some level, we all understand that. It’s not that we can’t benefit from times of solitude but rather that our lives are meant to be in relation to one another. The writers of the creation poems in Genesis understood this truth and made sure that the obvious was stated. It is not good for man to be alone.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes about the importance of what happens next in the Genesis poem.

Having created man, God sees him isolated, without an other, and says, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone’ (Gen 2:18)—the first occurrence of the words not good in the Bible. Dwelling alone is not a blessing but a curse. God then, while the man is sleeping, makes the first woman. Waking and seeing her, the man utters the first poem in the Bible:

Now I have found
bone of my bone,
flesh of my flesh.
She shall be called ‘woman’ [Ishah]
for she was taken from man [Ish]
(GEN. 2:23)

At the first reading, this sounds as if man is claiming ontological priority. First there was man; only afterwards was there woman. Man comes from God and woman comes from man. That is how classic Christian theologians read the text. But the Hebrew contains a nuance missed in translation. Biblical Hebrew contains two words for 'man,' adam and ish. Adam is the species. It means, roughly, Homo sapiens. Ish is the individual, the person. Until this point, the Bible has consistently used the word adam. This is the first occurrence of the word ish, and it comes after the word ishah, woman.

The Bible is here signaling a momentous proposition. Adam has to pronounce his wife's name before he can pronounce his own. I have to say 'you' before I can say 'I.' I have to acknowledge the other before I can truly understand myself. Not only can I not live alone, I cannot think, know, understand alone.²⁸

What a profound truth! Hidden within the poetic Hebrew of the creation poem is a profound truth about our need for community and relationship. In order to know ourselves, we must first relate to another. We are inexorably connected. We need each other in order to be fully alive and fully aware. We have to learn about another, relate to another, listen to another in order to know ourselves.

We need community to center us outside of ourselves.

**We need community to ground us and return us to our shared identity
as members of God's family.**

**We need community to connect us to stories and voices
that we would not know on our own.**

**We need community to bring us to lives of authenticity
where our burdens really can be shared and our joys really can be multiplied.**

²⁷ Every Good and Perfect Gift: Devotional Thoughts on the Gift of the Savior, under "13: Growth," (Uhrichville, OH: Barbour Books, 2014), 69.

²⁸ Jonathan Sacks, Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Twenty-First Century (New York: Random House, Inc., 2009), 186.

FAITH LIES

Session Twelve Handout

COMMUNITY NEEDS US

It is a simple logical step from recognizing that we need community to grasp that community—likewise—needs us. Not only do we have things to receive from community, we have things to give. We know this. We know that good relationships are not parasitic in nature, where one benefits and the other is harmed. Authentic community is mutual symbiosis—everyone benefits. We may not always benefit at the same times or in the same ways, but our communal relationships necessarily require that we receive and that we give.

Truth be told, we could probably go a step further and say that our communal relationships should be obligate. Science uses this term to refer to those symbiotic relationships where organisms are dependent on each other for survival. My community and the relationships therein are obligate. I depend on them and they depend on me. This, like many of our conclusions, is not a giant leap. Rather, it is simply a statement of something we often take for granted.

We know that our lives are intertwined with other people. We know that decisions that others make and actions that others take impact our lives—and vice versa. We know that none of us exists in a vacuum—disconnected from others or the symbiotic impact our lives have on each other. Healthy and helpful community needs us to be conscious of this truth and contribute accordingly.

There is a quotation that is often attributed to Lilla Watson—a visual artist, scholar, and indigenous Australian activist. The quote is brilliant in and of itself: “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”²⁹ Right there, I just want to say, “Amen!” My liberation is bound up with yours, so let’s work together toward freedom! But Watson lives out community even further by repeatedly refusing to take credit for this quotation, stating that she is “not comfortable being credited for something that had been born of a collective process.” Bam! Not only is the quote a statement about the intertwined nature of humanity, the citation of the quote drives the point home even further. She may have been the first person in her community to be quoted as saying that in Queensland in the 1970s, but she knows that such a conclusion and declarative truth was only born out of the consciousness of a collective. Her relationships and experiences with other people in community generated that quote. She did not generate it on her own.

That is the kind of “in your face” embrace of community that makes me feel like a ridiculous wimp. If I am a dude hanging out on the beach of community, Lilla Watson just emerged from swimming in the depths of the ocean, walked up the beach, and kicked sand in my face. I can talk a good game but—damn!—Lilla Watson can back it up. Her commitment to community almost makes me not want to share these other quotes with you because their authors might be embarrassed to take credit for saying them after Lilla has pointed out that none of us comes up with anything on our own.

Community needs us to recognize that our lives are connected—that what I do or do not do, what I share or do not share, what I learn or fail to learn impacts the lives of other people. Our symbiotic relationships in community are both mutual and obligate. We benefit from our relational lives in community. We need those relational lives to survive. We need community and community needs us.

²⁹Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, 1970s, accessed January 25, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilla_Watson

FAITH LIES

Session Twelve Handout

COMMUNITY IS NOT OPTIONAL

Faith presumes relationship. What does that mean? It means that we can't have faith without relationship. Faith necessarily requires us to try to relate to something other than ourselves—a higher power, God, a spirit, another person, or all of the above. Whatever the case may be, faith requires relationship. And not in any sporadic or isolated instance, either—all the time and everywhere.

Think of it this way: if our life of faith is the planet Earth, then relationships—our life in communion with others—are the weather. No matter where we go on earth or what time of day it is, there is weather. It may be calm weather—the kind that we don't really notice or think about, or it may be a raging tempest of a storm—the kind that scares us and causes us to hide. Hot, cold, windy, snowy, wet, dry, humid, mild, stormy, clear—wherever and whenever you are on earth, there is weather all around you. We exist in it all of the time. And in spite of what the Weather Channel may want us to believe, we don't control it, and it is not always predictable. True, there are patterns that we learn and study, but there are weather occurrences that seem to come out of nowhere.

The same is true of relationships. They are all around us all the time. We can no more exist apart from them than we can exist on Earth apart from the weather. Our ability to control relationships is equal to our ability to control the weather because they necessarily contain something beyond our control—another. Yes, like the weather, there are patterns that we can study and learn to live with harmoniously. But there are also relational behaviors that seem to come out of nowhere and defy explanation.

I know of no greater indicator to the communal and relational nature of the universe (and, thereby, its Creator) than the fact that we cannot exist apart from them. We are born of a physiological reproductive relationship. Don't miss that. You would not be here with us right now were it not for two people being in relationship to one another. However brief that relationship may have been, no relationship—no you.

And it didn't stop there. Upon being born, you immediately required the nurturing, protective relationships of others in order to survive. Nature is set up this way; it is nonnegotiable and irrefutable. We cannot come into existence without another person "making room" in themselves for us to exist. We cannot survive, once born, without the care of another. Without relationship, we do not exist. Without relationship, we do not live.

One of my spiritual directors frequently reminds me that human beings are the only creature in all of creation that are loved into walking. We do not emerge from the womb able to walk as most other mammals do. Most of the animals on earth have to get moving as soon as they are born or hatched—or else, they die. Their continued existence depends on their ability to move. Our continued existence depends solely on the care of another. When humans do learn to walk, it is because someone has modeled it for them, encouraged them, patiently helped them practice, picked them up when they wipe out, and encouraged them to try again. We are loved into walking—in relationship.

Community is not optional. It is hardwired into the very fabric of existence. We are never truly apart from relationship or community. We experience moments of isolation and loneliness, but even in those times, we are not truly alone.

All together now...

We come from community.
We need community.
Community needs us.
Community is not optional.

When we are tempted to keep our faith to ourselves as a private matter, we must recognize the lie and remember the truth. Our faith is not private. We do not have an independent relationship with God. We need each other to shape, practice, and broaden our faith. We need to share what we have received, and we need to receive what others share. If we are to be like our God, we will make room for one another. We will recognize that the dance spins around us all. To live any other way would be like trying to change the weather with our mind.



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION THIRTEEN DIALOGUE GUIDE: REAL FAITH IS BLIND BELIEF - PART 1

Handouts:

- “If You Just Believe” (pp. 201-203 of Faith Lies)
- “Separating the Fairy-Tale from the Faith” (pp. 207-210 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence – Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

“We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone.”

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “If You Just Believe” (pp. 201-203 of Faith Lies)

Watch the “If You Just Believe” clip on YouTube before reading:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbN5SIC3I4k>

- What have you been asked to “just believe” about God that troubled you?
- Where in your faith journey might the “humility of a child” set you free?

HANDOUT: “Separating the Fairy-Tale from the Faith” (pp. 207-210 of Faith Lies)

- How might defining faith as “Wherever this goes, I’m with you?” change you? How might it change your church or faith community?

TABLE/RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to read the contents of the scroll they have and either: Respond to one of the “faith lies” already on the scroll or “Wherever this goes, I’m with you.” You are invited to write about whatever this definition of faith stirs in you. You may have something you need to let go or get off your chest before you can say these words to God. You may need to hear these words and understand that you have never made a choice that caused God to abandon you. You may need to say these words to someone you love and do life with.

Leader(s) should allow 5 minutes for this exercise. As participants add to their parchment scrolls, the leaders can play the “I Will Be Here” music video in the background. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ed6eAXcr-K8

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

After all the scrolls are returned, the Leader(s) read from Matthew 28:18-20 (below):

Jesus comes to them saying, “God authorized and blessed me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have taught you. And remember, I AM with you always—day after day after day—right up to the end of the age.”

WHEREVER THIS GOES, I’M WITH YOU.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies “Chapter 7” pages 211 – 224.

FAITH LIES

Session Thirteen Handout

IF YOU JUST BELIEVE

Watch the YouTube clip:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbN5SIC3I4k>

You may be familiar with the movie *The Polar Express* and the accompanying Josh Groban Christmas song “Believe” or even the Chris Van Allsburg book that inspired it all.³⁰ If not, allow me to give you the gist of this charming Christmas story: it is our belief that makes things real.

After a dream-like experience at the North Pole with Santa Claus and the elves on Christmas Eve, the main character, who has been wrestling with his belief in Santa Claus, is given a present by the big man himself—a sleigh bell from Santa’s sleigh. When he awakes on Christmas morning, wondering if it was all real or just a dream, he still has the bell! Here’s the trick: the bell is empty—it has no visible clapper or marble to make it ring. Only those who believe in Santa can hear the ringing of the sleigh bell. To those who don’t believe, the bell is silent.

Friends, I do not want to ruin Christmas or throw *The Polar Express* under the bus. My kids love *The Polar Express*. We watch it every year. The idea that we can find peace in believing—even when it doesn’t make sense—is not a bad idea. However, when we let our definition of faith stop there, we are headed for trouble. To be blunt, that kind of belief is something we do as children. That kind of belief is how we approach fairy-tales—or even *The Polar Express*. It is not a bad thing. Believing in things that are greater than ourselves and our understanding is a necessary part of our development. Such belief brings us to a place of humility and, hopefully, to awe and wonder. Some could argue—and I would agree—that it is where faith begins.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

(MATT. 18:1-4)

There it is, right? This is the verse that gets used to tell us the “faith of a child” is the goal. But that is not what it says, is it? The text actually says that we should become humble like a child. That our belief should lead us to a place of humility, awe, and wonder—a recognition that there is something greater than ourselves. This text is about humility, not about blind faith. Have you known many children who weren’t inquisitive? Who didn’t ask a thousand questions about every possible detail? I have three children, and their ability to ask questions has repeatedly triumphed over me in victory. They investigate, explore, and question like ceaseless sponges, desperate to soak up information. How in the world did we ever arrive at the conclusion that to have faith like a child was to accept without questioning?

Faith, our spirituality, God—these things are not sleigh bells that only ring if you believe. We are allowed to question, to wonder, to doubt, to scrutinize. I realize it may seem like a minor detail, but we must recognize that it is not our blind belief that makes them real. They are real whether or not we believe in them. If God is a sleigh

bell, that sleigh bell is a ring-a-ling, jing ting ting-a-ling regardless of what we believe or accept blindly. God's power and presence and the realness of spirituality do not originate in our belief. We do not believe God into existence or believe our faith into substance. God is—whether we believe blindly or not. And isn't that the way it should be? Do we really want to have faith in a God who requires our belief in order to be real? Or do you want to trust in something that is so present, so strong, so good, that it just IS—no matter what?

It is not our blind belief that makes God real or that secures our faith. The truth is, we are not even called to such a standard. We are called to the humility of children. Wrestling with these truths confronts us with the place of belief in our lives and allows us to ask the question of what our belief actually does—or should do. Just because our belief doesn't make God real doesn't mean it doesn't have an impact. In fact, our beliefs have a profound impact on us. Imagine if you ran around with an empty sleigh bell in your pocket, insisting through the silence that it was ringing. Then imagine how you would feel if someone ran up to you with an empty bell they insisted was ringing and asked you if you heard it, too. Would you pretend to hear it even though you didn't? How would you feel about the person with the bell? How would you feel about the bell?

³⁰ Chris Van Allsburg, William Broyles, Jr., and Robert Zemeckis, *The Polar Express*, DVD, directed by Robert Zemeckis (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005).

Glen Ballard and Alan Silverstri, "Believe," performed by Josh Groban, *The Polar Express Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, CD Track 4, Warner Brothers, 2004.

Chris Van Allsburg, *The Polar Express* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1985).

FAITH LIES

Session Thirteen Handout

SEPARATING THE FAIRY-TALE FROM THE FAITH

Our spiritual lives have an inexorable need for critical thought because even the slightest amount of critical thought exposes the fairy-tales we are telling as facades. The fairy-tales aren't the truth: they are candy coating that we have confused for something good. Pay attention closely here: the fairy-tales are facades—not God, not faith, not the scriptures. Yet without critical thought and reflection on our faith, our beliefs, our scriptures, we will not be able to tell the difference. Instead of blindly accepting the fairy-tales, we have to do the work of getting to know that which our faith is actually built upon. This is a very important distinction. Blind leaps and swallowing fairy-tales without question is not faith—that is superstition. Faith believes that God, the scriptures, and the history of God's people are worthy of investigation, exploration, and critical thought and reflection. The strength or genuineness of our faith should not be measured by how much we are able to believe but by how we trust that the story of God demands and requires our questions and critical thoughts.

That is not a haphazard word choice—requires is the right word. Faith should require critical thought, reflection, introspection, and investigation. Faith should require questions. Faith should require that we understand the context of the writings we claim are the “Word of God.” Faith should require that we discuss, debate, and argue over the meanings and impacts of different stories and truths in community. Faith should require conversation and consideration of perspectives beyond our own.

There has not been a day in my life where my faith didn't require such work from me. Which is not to say I always do the work, just that the sustaining, deepening, and strengthening of my faith requires it. Contrastingly, there have been very few times in my life where my faith required a blind leap. There have been plenty of obscured steps—times that required me to put my next foot forward in trust even when I didn't know if it would go well—but very few blind leaps off a cliff, not knowing how I would land. Herein lies an important distinction.

This lie is about the reduction of faith to simply a test of how much we are willing to believe without question or engagement. This lie is not about taking obscured steps forward toward God and other people. People take obscured steps forward every day, and doing so requires steadfast faith, hope, and love. There is a confidence-building beauty in taking and beholding obscured steps of faith as they are made toward God and other people. Coming out from under this lie does not mean that our lives will be filled with clarity and certainty. Life—whether lived in faith or not—will definitely still include obscured steps. There will be times when we're not sure, and we just have to step forward and do what we feel is the right thing right now. The Apostle Paul wrote about such realities in 1st Corinthians 13—a text commonly associated with weddings but strangely about much more than romantic love.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

(1 COR. 13:8–13)

Paul is testifying to the fact that there will be times where our prophecies and our knowledge can't take us any further—that as much as we may think we know or see, we simply can't grasp the whole of it. According to Paul, life necessarily includes obscured steps forward, and those steps must be made in faith, hope, and love.

What Paul doesn't write—anywhere in the Bible—is that faith is a blind leap. The measure of our faith does not lie in how much we are willing to suspend our intellect and accept. Our faith is engaged to and informed by the story of God, the people of God, and our own interaction with the divine. Accordingly, we develop what rabbi Emil Fackenheim referred to as “Midrashic Stubbornness,” or an ability to perceive what is happening to us or around us as part of God's larger story.³¹ According to Fackenheim, it is only through such stubbornness that the Jews can face and frame the horrors of the Holocaust while stepping forward in faith. That stubbornness tells us that no matter where the story may go, at the end of the story, we are with God.

That I believe is the opposite of a blind leap. That is a faith that is informed by what God has already done. That is a hope that believes God continues to intercede. That is a love that says, “I would rather experience death or discomfort than disconnect.” I once heard N.T. Wright describe faith as essentially saying to God, “Wherever this goes, I'm with you.” I love that. It is a simple yet profound statement. All at once, it recognizes that there will be obscured steps, but that no matter where those obscured steps go, we are safe, and we are loved. That is not a blind leap. That is not a faith that is defined by what we believe. It is a faith defined by relationship and story.

That makes much more sense in my life. Even if I believe I have taken some blind leaps, I usually find that if I am honest, it is my retelling of my stories that has turned obscured steps into blind leaps. This is the faith equivalent of a fishing tale. With every recounting, the fish gets bigger. Furthermore, when I really look back on my journey and ponder the few blind leaps I think I have taken, I am not so sure that God asked me to take them—or that my faith demanded such leaps. It is more likely that I took those leaps on my own, and God lovingly leapt with me. It's as if my selective memory of the event constructs a fairy-tale cozy to cover and obscure the real story. Over time the real story disappears, and all I am left with is the fairy-tale—the story I invented.

³¹ Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 21.



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION FOURTEEN DIALOGUE GUIDE: REAL FAITH IS BLIND BELIEF - PART 2

Handouts:

- "A People Named Wrestle" (pp. 211-213 of Faith Lies)
- "The Faith of Galileo" (pp. 215-218 of Faith Lies)
- "The Difference Between Belief and Value" (pp. 221-223 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence - Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

"We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone."

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “A People Named Wrestle” (pp. 211-213 of Faith Lies)

- How do you feel about being descended from those who wrestle with God? Are we living up to our name?

HANDOUT: “The Faith of Galileo” (pp. 215-218 of Faith Lies)

Watch the “Galileo Galilei – in a nutshell” on YouTube before reading:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMM8vx9vDiE>

- Galileo risked everything to wrestle publicly with an accepted biblical interpretation that contradicted his experience and study. What accepted biblical interpretations do you face that contradict your experience and study?

HANDOUT: “The Difference Between Belief and Value” (pp. 215-218 of Faith Lies)

- What do you hope your life demonstrates that you value?
- What do you hope your church or faith community demonstrates that it values?

TABLE/RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

Participants are encouraged to read the contents of the scroll they have and either: Respond to one of the “faith lies” already on the scroll or you are invited to write about some aspect of your faith with which you feel called to wrestle and how you intend to wrestle with it.

Naming the belief, interpretation, rule, etc. is important—but so is a specific plan of action. Try to write specifically about how you intend to wrestle with whatever divine bee is in your bonnet.

Leader(s) should allow 5 minutes for this exercise. As participants add to their parchment scrolls, the leaders can play the “Galileo ... Indigo Girls ... lyrics video” music video in the background. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCbjGH2gO6Y>

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Returning the scrolls/Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer a blessing or benediction to the participants as the basket is passed around for the collection of the participants’ scrolls.

Extinguish the candle

Homework/Reading for the next session

Participants are invited to read Faith Lies “Conclusion” & “Epilogue” pages 225 – 239.

FAITH LIES

Session Fourteen Handout

A PEOPLE NAMED WRESTLE

One of the many unfortunate results of our expressed faith over the last few hundred years has most certainly been the dulling of critical thinking. We are afraid to question. We are afraid to doubt. We are afraid that unbelief will somehow result in an eternal penalty of some sort. Is that the way it should be? Do we believe in a God so small—in a faith so insecure—that it cannot handle questions or doubt—that it turns away from critical thinking?

The faith that has been passed down to us through thousands of years came through searchers—people who explored, struggled, risked, failed, doubted, and wrestled. That is not to say they never had to take an obscured step. In fact, I think that same history of faithful people arguing and questioning their faith also included times when no answers could be found, and they moved forward anyway. Again, the problem is not that faith can include unknowing and uncertainty. The problem is that we think that blind leaps are all there is to faith. There most certainly are times in any life where the only way forward is to trust completely without complete understanding. Yet, even in those times when the answers don't come, we are never asked to suppress our intellect. We are never asked to stop asking the questions. We are never asked to stop wrestling.

Wrestling is who we are—the people of Israel are literally named for those who wrestle with the divine.

The same night, he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So, he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So, Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."
(GEN. 32:22–30)

If you ascribe to any faith that finds its roots in the stories of Genesis and the Exodus, you are a descendant of wrestlers. You are a distant, perhaps adopted, relative of a people whose very identity comes from their calling to struggle with their relationship to the divine. Their name is a marker—a testament to the fact that the relationship with God requires questioning and engagement. They have wrestled to learn more of what God is like. They have wrestled to learn more of who they are. Jacob did not simply believe in the man with whom he wrestled. The story doesn't say that while alone in the night, Jacob encountered a man and his faith was so strong that he believed the man to be God or an angel of God. The story says that Jacob wrestled with the man all night. The story says that even after his hip was wrenched out of socket, Jacob refused to let go until he received a blessing—a new revelation, a new understanding.

That is in the DNA of faith: wrestling, questioning—pushing past pain and discomfort in pursuit of a greater understanding. It is our name. It is our identity. We are a people called to wrestle.

We started this journey tackling the lie of biblical literalism and seeing how, when confronted with aspects of God's story we cannot explain, we tend to responses of fight, flight, or freeze. As we near the end of the exploration, we should recognize that those same responses are at work in every lie we have faced. They are still at work in this lie. Fighting, in the sense of digging our heels in behind a certain belief or biblical interpretation, is not wrestling. I know that seems nitpicky, but Jacob didn't fight God. That would have looked a lot different. Perhaps it would have looked like Jacob taking shelter behind a large rock and throwing stones or shooting arrows at the man in the night. In a fighting posture, the point is to overcome—to destroy the other. Fighting seeks to be right, to be the victor—to conform the other's will to our own. This is what we do when we search for the remains of the ark or debate scientists on television regarding creation. Fighting is not wrestling. The story does not tell us that Jacob sought to overcome or destroy the man. Jacob wasn't seeking to be right—to conform the man's will to his own. Jacob wanted a blessing. He wanted to know the name of the one with whom he wrestled.

Fleeing and freezing are not something Jacob did either. We know what these responses would look like as well. Jacob did not run at the sight of the impending wrestling match. He could have. He had sent all his people and possessions forward. At this point, he was traveling light and could have responded to the visit from the divine by turning tail and hauling arse out of there. This is what we do when we withdraw from the conversations and arguments of our times. And let's be clear. Withdrawal doesn't necessarily mean that we run away. We can freeze, too. We are complex beings, fully capable of being present and not present at the same time. We can be there and not be engaged. We can be at the scene of the wrestling but not actually wrestle. Anytime we choose not to engage, not to argue, debate, or investigate because we are afraid that our beliefs or our faith can't withstand the wrestling, we are not living out the faith we were given.

FAITH LIES

Session Fourteen Handout

THE FAITH OF GALILEO

Watch the YouTube clip:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMM8vx9vDiE

Galileo Galilei, the Italian astronomer, physicist, and philosopher who is widely accepted as the father of modern science, found himself near the beginning of the bad idea that science stands in opposition to faith. In the early seventeenth century, his writings in further study and support of the Copernican idea that the earth revolved around the sun conflicted with the Church doctrine that understood the earth to be the center of the creation. Where did the Church get such a doctrine? How did the faithful arrive at this orthodoxy? In two words, interpretation and tradition.

At the time Galileo was writing, the accepted tradition posited that verses such as Psalm 93:1, Psalm 96:10, Psalm 104:5, and 1 Chronicles 16:30 were to be understood as asserting the earth as the center of the universe. As you read the scriptures below, recognize the interpretive leaps required to arrive at such a singular and concrete conclusion.

He has established the world; it shall never be moved; (PS. 93:1)

The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. (PS. 96:10 / 1 CHRON. 16:30)

You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. (PS. 104:5)

These verses were interpreted as making empirical statements about the universe—that God had established the earth as literally stationary in the cosmos. Since the earth could not move, the thinking went, everything else in the heavens must rotate around it. Yep ... that just happened ... literally, like 400 years ago.

Into that juggernaut of thought enters Galileo. Galileo argued that heliocentrism—the idea that the sun is at the center of the universe—was not contrary to the Scripture and that the writers of the poetry in the aforementioned psalms never intended their verses to be interpreted as making literal and empirical statements about the placement of the planet Earth in the universe.

Unfortunately for Galileo, once his opinions moved from scientific observation to debating whether or not the Church was correctly interpreting Scripture, things began to get ugly. In 1616, at the instruction of Pope Paul V, Galileo was ordered to abandon the opinion that the sun is the center of the universe and to cease teaching, writing of, or defending the idea in any way.³² To make a long story short, Galileo did not suppress his intellect nor would he see his pursuit of truth as threatening to his faith. His continued writings and defense of those ideas caused him to be threatened with torture and ultimately punished by the Church in 1633. Galileo was found guilty of holding ideas that were contrary to Holy Scripture and sentenced to house arrest for the remainder of his life. His writings on the subject were banned, and publication of any of his works was forbidden.³³

Now, resist the temptation to roll your eyes at the Church. That is low-hanging fruit. Hindsight is 20/20, and the Church has owned its mistake with regard to Galileo. The ideas put forth by Copernicus and Galileo were incredible ideas at the time. They seemed counterintuitive to everything people had been taught and accepted about the nature of the universe. We do not arrogantly look to the wrestling between Galileo and the Church in order to condemn the Church. The Pope and the leaders of the Church were faithful people, just like Galileo. They were doing the best that they could with the narrative they had been given.

Galileo saw that narrative to be incomplete and worthy of reflection.

Galileo refused to suppress his intellect as if that were what faith requires.

Galileo believed in a God who was not threatened by the developing apprehension of a people trying to understand the universe—and sometimes getting it wrong.

To be sure, the Church really blew this one. The very people who were entrusted with the story of a “free God that desires the free worship of free people”³⁴ actually believed the best thing they could do in response to Galileo was to remove his freedom.

Yikes!

That is some epic and ironic failure! To be honest, though, that is a level of completely striking out with which I can identify. I have screwed up like that. I have been so afraid of new ideas that I have used the Scripture, my God, and my faith to shut someone down. I—just like the Church leaders Galileo took to task—have been a prisoner of faith lies, too. I have created prisoners of war in the battle between my fear and my faith.

According to legend, as Galileo finished his forced recanting of the theory that the earth moved around the sun, he muttered the phrase, “And yet it moves.” As much as that may inspire our righteous rebellion, I believe there is more going on in that statement. To me, that is a statement of continued wrestling. This man has just been obedient to the Church and the faith to which he ascribed—even when he believed them to be wrong. He is, however, not blindly obedient. He will maintain both his relationship to the faith and his intellect. He will continue to wrestle and, in doing so, invite others to do the same. That is the faith of Galileo. “And yet it moves” is far more interesting and compelling to me as a commitment to wrestle. The Church wrenched Galileo’s hip, so to speak. He could have refused to recant. He could have turned his back on the faith. Instead, he remained in the relationship and in the struggle.

³² John L. Heilbron, *Galileo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 218.

³³ *Ibid.*, 308–317.

³⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *Yitro (5773) - The Politics of Revelation*, rabbisacks.org, accessed September 15, 2013, <http://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-yitro-the-politics-of-revelation/>.

FAITH LIES

Session Fourteen Handout

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BELIEF AND VALUE

A belief is an acceptance of something as true or that something exists. It is a trust or confidence in someone or something. Compare that to a value, which is a principle, standard, or judgment of what is important in life. I have become increasingly disinterested in what people believe and increasingly interested in what people value. People believe all sorts of things for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes, we can't even tell each other why we believe what we believe. Even worse, we often claim to hold beliefs for which there is no evidence in our lives that we actually believe them. Friends, there are plenty of people who claim to believe in Jesus who look, live, and behave nothing like him. They believe in him, but they do not value what he valued. So, what is that "belief" worth?

Contrastingly, when someone values something—I mean really values it—everyone around them knows it. Our values are expressed in our behavior. It's the difference between my having a belief in my kids or valuing my kids. I hope and pray that my life communicates that I value my children. I think if someone were to document a day in my life, they would be able to make some conclusions about what I hold as important after watching me. I don't know if they'd have an idea of what I believe, but they would know what I care about. This is not to say that beliefs aren't important because they are. Beliefs exist in the core of our being; they can help us define our world and our place in it. What we believe is important. Yet, we must face the reality that our beliefs present an incomplete, inconsistent, and developing picture. Our beliefs are dynamic—they change and evolve.

So when people want to talk to me about faith, I try to share the values faith has instilled in my life. Love, relationship, story, inclusion, forgiveness, exploration, rest—these are the things I have learned to value and that I continue to grow toward. These are the things that I hope my life communicates. What I believe is much more fluid than what I value. My beliefs can be radically changed by new information or experience. Think of it this way: when Galileo's studies allowed him to theorize about the earth's movement around the sun, what changed—his beliefs or his values?

At some point in Galileo's life, he believed—as he had been taught—that the earth was the center of the universe. Later, Galileo received new information and insight that caused his belief to change. When his belief shifted and he thought that the sun was the center of the universe, did his values change? Surely, I am no expert on what Galileo valued, but his life is a testament to the reality that he valued the pursuit of knowledge, truth, and exploration. The real kick in the backside, however, is that his response to his sanctioning by the Church also seems to reveal that he valued the Church, even when it was imprisoning him. His beliefs shifted—to the point of putting him at odds with the leaders of his faith, but his values remained rooted. Galileo valued relationship. Galileo valued faith. Galileo valued wrestling. His beliefs changed, his values did not.

So, what do you value?

Think about it. Write down some responses. What values has your family passed down to you? What values have been passed to you by your faith? How have you seen those values growing or deepening throughout your life? My suspicion is that we will notice a consistency and development in our values—good or bad. Values seem to follow the overarching journey of our stories. Values seem to ooze out of us, regardless of what we claim to believe. Values are the real testimony of our faith—whether we like it or not.

When we hold faith up as a collection of blind beliefs—fairy-tales in which we are willing to believe—we show the world that we do not value intellect or critical thought. Even worse, our blind belief can be used to separate us from those who won't or can't believe. In such instances, our faith appears to value

- ... orthodoxy over love
- ... doctrine over relationship
- ... fairy-tales over story
- ... preservation over inclusion
- ... winning over forgiveness
- ... absolutes over exploration
- ... striving over rest

That faith is not helpful to anyone. That faith is a shell of what was handed down to us. It is a lie. It is not who we are called to be.

We are called to value love. We are called to value relationships with other people. We are called to value listening to God's story and the stories of others. We are called to value those at the margins and those in power—even when they try to exist exclusive of one another. We are called to treasure forgiveness when we receive it and give it away as often as possible. We are called to search—to value questions and doubt. We are called to value rest as a posture of humility in knowing that we all have a home and a family to which we belong.

We are called to keep all these things in tension to one another. If that sounds impossible, that's good. It is not something we can do alone—we need help. Nor is it something we ever conquer. It is something with which we wrestle. That is who we are.

When we reduce our faith or our scriptural stories to a blind leap of faith, we are in danger of sidestepping, or missing altogether, the great question we are being asked or the greater reality to which we are being invited to awaken. When we believe faith is simply a blind leap, our faith lies to us. There comes a moment when we can no longer keep quiet—when we can no longer ignore or turn a blind eye.

When will that moment be?



FAITH LIES

Seven Incomplete Ideas That Hijack Faith and How to See Beyond Them

SESSION FIFTEEN DIALOGUE GUIDE: CONCLUSION & EPILOGUE

Handouts:

- "Living Outside the Lies" (pp. 225-227 of Faith Lies)
- "Where the Freedom of the LORD Is..." (pp. 41-42 of Faith Lies)
- "A ROHR-ing Epilogue" (pp. 235-239 of Faith Lies)

Supplies:

- Parchment scrolls and basket
- Journals (optional)
- Candle, candle holder, matches
- Laptop / Television for videos

GATHERING

Silence – Centering

The leader(s) invite everyone into 1-2 minutes of silence to facilitate all being present and settled into the space and task at hand. The leader(s) can close the time of silence with a communal prayer if desired.

Candle Lighting and Parchment Scrolls

While the basket is passed around allowing participants to claim a parchment scroll, the candle is lit with these words:

"We light this candle as a symbol of our renewed agreement to encourage and preserve a free and safe gathering for everyone."

WORD

Group Reading/Sharing

Volunteers are asked to read aloud consecutive portions of the handouts and then share—if they desire—from their own experience and understanding about what they have read.

HANDOUT: “Living Outside the Lies” (pp. 225-227 of Faith Lies)

- Does any part of your faith currently feel like a prison cell with which you have become comfortable?
What does your fear say you will lose if you leave the cell behind?

HANDOUT: “Where the Freedom of the LORD Is...” (pp. 230-233 of Faith Lies)

- Where are you currently recognizing freedom in your faith journey
—and what steps will you take to move toward that freedom?

HANDOUT: “A ROHR-ing Epilogue” (pp. 235-239 of Faith Lies)

- How are you currently experiencing a rhythm of rest in your life?
- What steps will you take to build a rhythm of rest into your life?

TABLE / RESPONSE

Wrestling with the scroll

This will be our final scroll entry.

As we look over the writing on our scrolls, we are invited to create a final entry by either:

- Describing an awakening we have experienced during this journey
- Describing next steps we intend to take as a result of this class...or
 - Completing the following statement:

I have been invited to see beyond the lie that _____ so that I can _____.

Leader(s) should allow 5 minutes for this exercise. As participants add to their parchment scrolls, the leaders can play the “The Long Road” music video in the background. [youtube.com/watch?v=ZR_W54nmOLo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZR_W54nmOLo)

Questions and/or remaining dialogue as time allows

SENDING

Participants are invited to keep the scroll upon which they just completed the final entry. Each scroll contains the collective wrestling and journey reflections of fellow participants. They may want to frame the scroll, place it in their Bible, burn it, bury it, etc...however each participant is led.

Blessing or Benediction

Leader(s) may offer this blessing or benediction to the participants as the candle is extinguished.

**Whatever allows you to wrestle,
whatever leads you to awakenings,
whatever lets you tell and listen to stories,
whatever causes you to give and receive love,
whatever you find to be helpful along your path,
if there is any inclusion and acceptance,
and if there is that which builds and releases
freedom, think about these things.**

Extinguish the candle

FAITH LIES

Session Fifteen Handout

LIVING OUTSIDE THE LIES

This is what gives origin to your beliefs: fixed, unchanging ways of looking at a reality which is not fixed and unchanging at all but in movement and change. So it is no longer the real world that you interact with and love but a world created by your head. It is only when you drop your beliefs, your fears, and the attachments that breed them that you will be freed from the insensitivity that makes you so deaf and blind to yourself and to the world.³⁵

You have to admit—that is a serious quote! What a way to start the conclusion, right? Anthony de Mello, the Indian Jesuit priest who wrote these words, was not known for beating around the bush. Straight to the point—“It is only when you drop your beliefs, your fears, and the attachments that breed them that you will be freed from the insensitivity that makes you so deaf and blind to yourself and to the world.”

How do you react to that statement? That’s one of those statements that makes me want to sit down for a bit. Confronting the truth that I may be deaf and blind to the world and myself is not something I want to do on my feet. I need to sit for that kind of work.

Once I am seated, I can start to realize that removing the fear from my life sounds like a good idea. I would like to live a life with no fear. But then there are those other two things I have to drop—my beliefs and my attachments. That does not sound like fun. How do you feel about dropping your beliefs or your attachments? Does the thought of dropping your beliefs—even if they are the bad or incomplete ideas we have chronicled—make you nervous?

Anytime we grow accustomed to something, we have a hard time growing beyond it. That can even be the case with fear, injustice, imprisonment, and suffering. No person who ever lived aspired to be afraid. No one who has ever been born wanted to grow up to suffer injustice or be imprisoned. Yet, that is exactly what many of us do. We settle into suffering, oppression, and fear. We get used to it—so used to it that it begins to feel like home.

All we have done in this book is trace through seven commingled lies from which I struggle to be freed—seven incomplete ideas that caused me to live in and engender religious oppression and fear. Years ago, a friend of mine who had been praying for me looked up and said he had seen an image while he prayed. The image was of me sitting in a prison cell. The strange thing was that the door to the prison cell was not there. It had been removed. The cell was wide open, and yet I still sat there as though I were locked in.

De Mello’s quote reminds of me of that prison cell. It reminds me that I have choices to make and that this journey is never complete. It forces me to reflect on my attachments, my fears, and my beliefs. Where am I sitting in a prison cell, believing there is a locked door when there is really no door at all? To what am I attached in that cell—what do I find comforting about it? If I do get up and walk out of that cell, what do I fear I will lose? What do I fear will happen if I embrace freedom? These are the kinds of questions with which we wrestle when we confront the lies of our faith.

There is another wonderful quote from a movie that was seen as a box-office flop. The quote—in my humble opinion—is so good, however, that I think of the movie as a success. The movie is *After Earth*, a sci-fi thriller starring Will Smith and his son, Jaden. It comes about as Smith is trying to communicate to his son, who is alone and in danger on another side of the planet. Trying to calm his hysterical son over the radio, Smith says,

Recognize your power.

You have the ability to create or co-create what happens next.

Fear is not real. The only place that fear can exist is in our thoughts of the future.

It is a product of our imagination, causing us to fear things that do not at present and may not ever exist.

That is near insanity.

Now, do not misunderstand me. Danger is real, but fear is a choice.

We are all telling ourselves a story.³⁶

We are all telling ourselves a story, and we all possess the power to change that story. What stories are we telling ourselves? Where did we get these stories? Are they true? Do our stories point us toward freedom and the reality that there is no door on the cell? Or do our stories keep us comfortable where we are?

35 Anthony De Mello, *The Way to Love: Meditations for Life* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1991), 48.

36 M. Night Shyamalan and Gary Whitta, *After Earth*, DVD, directed by M. Night Shyamalan (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2013).

FAITH LIES

Session Fifteen Handout

WHERE THE FREEDOM OF THE LORD IS...

In the first century, the apostle Paul—no stranger to prison cells himself—wrote letters to the faith community he helped establish in Corinth. In what was known as the second of those letters, he describes to his friends how people can harden their minds and their hearts—in essence pulling a veil down over themselves so as not to see. He then makes this most compelling statement, “Now the LORD is Spirit and where the Spirit of the LORD is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17).

This is one of those statements people grow up with in the Christian church. It's in songs, Sunday school lessons, and sermons. It's on bumper stickers and billboards. “Where the Spirit of the LORD is, there is freedom.” It makes sense. God is in the freedom business. That is what God is into—freedom. The library of the Bible represents a progressive story of people moving toward freedom at God's urging and by God's power and love. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches, “At the heart of Judaism is the idea—way ahead of its time, and not always fully realized—that the free God desires the free worship of free human beings.”³⁷

Yet, I think I misunderstood this idea for most of my life. For some reason, in my Western mind, I made this statement into a recipe. In essence, I believed that if I wanted freedom, I needed to pursue the Spirit. In other words, if I tried really hard to connect to the presence of God, I might catch a glimpse and thereby earn or access some freedom. Maybe if I worshiped hard enough or prayed hard enough, I could get the Spirit of God to dwell where I was, and the freedom would rub off on me.

Then one day, I found myself in a tough situation, and I called one of my mentors for some direction. After listening to me whine and describe my problem, my mentor said, “Darrell, where do you see the freedom in this situation?” I tried to answer that question as best I could by describing where I thought freedom could possibly exist amidst my circumstances. My mentor said, “Go there,” and hung up the phone. It was like a light came on inside of me. Paul's statement became something completely new to me. Look for the freedom and go there—because that is where God is. Wherever you find freedom, you will also be accessing the Spirit of the LORD.

That idea really changes things when I find myself sitting in a prison cell. If I am not experiencing freedom, it's not God's doing. It's mine. God is in the freedom business. Wherever God's presence is, there will be freedom. This kind of freedom is not simply the ability to choose to do whatever the heck we want. That kind of freedom—or free will—is implicit in our reality. We always have that kind of freedom (unless it is oppressed by other human beings). The kind of freedom we are referencing here is more than free will. It is the kind of freedom that causes us to be fully alive—to connect, synchronize, and engage with something larger than ourselves and know intuitively that there is something more going on. This kind of freedom lies just below the surface and unites everything. It causes us to feel empowered, connected, and strong—not powerless, isolated, and weak. This kind of freedom warms us and inspires us—making our hearts race and our minds explode with possibilities. This divine freedom always—and I mean always, without exception—results in love.

Look around your life ...

- Where do you see such freedom?
- Is it always in the places it is “supposed” to reside?
- Do you sometimes experience or witness freedom in situations or locations that are supposed to be “unbiblical” or “against God’s will?”
- What does it mean if you experience divine freedom in situations or places of which you assumed God disapproved?
- Is your religion causing you to experience freedom? Is your doctrine?
- Do your beliefs lead you to freedom? Your attachments? Your fears?
- What does it mean if you are not experiencing divine freedom in the situations and places of which you assumed God approved?
- Is the story you are telling yourself—the story upon which you build your life—a story that leads to freedom?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul—writing from prison—offers his friends some advice for the journey. He wrote, “Finally, Beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4:8).

My prayer for this writing has been that it will cause the kind of questioning that leads to freedom. Freedom may be hard to spot in your circumstances. We don’t always get a clear picture. Sometimes, we take obscured steps forward. For some of us, we may just see the slightest hint of dawn on the horizon. For others of us, we may not see it all—we may have to remember where the last dawn broke and move toward that memory, trusting in the God who desires our freedom. Wherever it may be in your life and circumstances, my prayer is that you will search for freedom and move toward it. That is where the Spirit of the LORD is.

³⁷ Sacks, *The Politics of Revelation*.

FAITH LIES

Session Fifteen Handout

A ROHR-ING EPILOGUE

Ironically, a prophet must be educated inside the system in order to have the freedom to critique that very system. You have to know the rules of any tradition, and you have to respect those rules enough to know why they do exist—and thus how to break them properly, for the sake of a larger and more essential value. This is what Martin Luther King, Jr. taught America and what Gandhi taught the British. Here is the key: you can only unlock systems from the inside.³⁸

If any part of this journey has encouraged you or brought freedom, rejoice and bless the LORD. That is really all you need to do at this point. One of the mistakes I make repeatedly upon awakening to new revelations of freedom or consciousness is to assume that it is now my job to make sure everyone around me receives the same revelation. As Rohr points out, that is not necessarily the case. Rushing into my priest's office or my local church board meeting to tell them all their beliefs or doctrine are wrong is not going to help anyone.

In our journey, we have learned that there is not one right way to believe or behave and that we do not need to defend God or our faith. Now, we must trust that if we have truly awakened to revelation or freedom, God will provide us with opportunities to grow and to share. We may, in fact, be given opportunities to teach against lies in the systems of our faith, but we must do so, as Rohr states, "from the inside." Being on the inside necessarily requires love. To know a system, a church, a community well enough to understand the lies which imprison it and where those lies came from means that we are invested. When have you ever welcomed someone who wants to tear down something you care about? We will only be given opportunities to share our freedom in the systems where we have built, studied, listened, prayed, and loved.

We must remember that any worthwhile wisdom we have ever received was something to which we awakened when we were ready. Another way to say that is that we hang onto what's working for us. When our ideas or our faith stops working, we go searching—then we are open to awakening. My friend, Chris Estus, helps me to remember that I am not called to look forward with fear nor back with disdain. I do not need to fear the future—mine or yours. I do not need to be disgusted or ashamed of the past—mine or yours.

In 1897, Rev. W.L. Sheldon wrote a wise reflection that is often incorrectly attributed to Ernest Hemingway. "Remember that there is nothing noble in being superior to some other man. The true nobility is in being superior to your previous self."³⁹ We might trip up a little bit over that word "noble" but just substitute in the word holy or righteous. There is nothing righteous about thinking our beliefs or our faith is better than someone else's—that they would be better off if they believed or understood like us. True righteousness lies in humble and joyous reflection upon our own developing belief and faith. Wherever a person is on the journey—that is where they are. And where they are is valid. It is how they will get to where they are going. It is not our job to push anyone down the path.

While finishing the writing of this book, I got to go to the Grand Canyon with my family—including my parents. Having been to the Grand Canyon before, my dad had some rules for his grandchildren. The rules were simple—three basic guidelines to govern our behavior whilst we all encountered the Grand Canyon together.

- 1. Don't jump in.**
- 2. Take one step back.**
- 3. Adapt.**

By the time we arrived at the Grand Canyon, my father had so drilled these rules into all of our heads that we didn't even have to say them. He could just say "Rule 2," and everyone knew that someone in our party was getting too close to the edge of the Canyon and we all needed to take a step back. Granted, Rules 1 and 2 were very specific to not falling into the Grand Canyon while Rule 3 was much more vague and inclusive of the whiny behavior we all expect when traveling as a family. Still, the rules were poignant. They governed our time together well—and made us laugh a lot.

The more I thought about it, I realized that these rules had application beyond the Grand Canyon. This is typically the way my father works—he is brilliant that way. So, I share these rules with you here, at the end of our journey together, as a possible guideline on how to move forward. As we all seek to grow into freedom and share our awakening with others, we must always remember:

1. **Don't jump in.** Trust that the God who brought you here is still at work. We are not brought to new levels of freedom and truth so that we can respond with the anxiety and pressure of fixing everyone and everything around us. *Relax.*

2. **Take one step back.** As the wise rabbi Chris Estus has taught me, if we are depressed, we should get busy—if we are confused, we should do nothing. If we are depressed and confused, we should take a nap. Get your bearings. We don't have to create opportunities to love others and share our stories. They will come—so let them. *Rest.*

3. **Adapt.** Let people be who they are and let them be where they are. Transcend and include—get to know people better rather than trying to make them better. What comes our way will probably look much different from what we planned for—which kind of puts all our planning and manipulating in perspective, doesn't it? *Receive.*

Richard Rohr teaches that great change only comes about through great love or great suffering, and great suffering is not the business to which we are called as people of faith. We are called to great love. Maybe that is where the three rules of the Grand Canyon lead.

Don't jump in—relax. Take one step back—rest. Adapt—receive.

If we do all that, love is inevitable.

³⁸ Richard Rohr, Who Would Want to Be a Prophet, Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, accessed February 19, 2015, <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation-Who-Would-Want-to-Be-a-Prophet>

³⁹ W. L. Sheldon, "What to Believe: An Ethical Creed," The Unitarian, Volume XII, Frederick B. Mott, ed. (Boston: Geo H. Ellis, 1897), 270.

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