

## Confessions of a Disillusioned Christian Why am I still here?

Dennis A. Wilkinson

### Overview

Dostoevsky's character Ivan, in his famous book *The Brothers Karamazov*, found himself unable to commit to Christian belief because he was haunted by "great unanswerable" doubts about his faith.

I was raised in a Christian home, went to a Christian high school and a Christian university. Just for good measure, I obtained an MDiv at a Christian seminary. I even started a Christian church! If anyone should have a robust, unshakable faith, it's me.

And yet, after decades of faith, I still find myself relating to Ivan. In quiet moments, the doubts flare up. Is the faith I cling to really true or is it all a hoax? Often these faith struggles paralyze me—which isn't ideal since I work in professional ministry! It's no fun to believe and not believe at the same time. I often feel like a hypocrite, a fake, and a coward. There are times I want to break away from it all, but I have *just enough* faith to keep me among the faithful, yet wholly without joy. It's torture. I look around at other Christians who seem to be in touch with God, who love the Bible and are excited by their faith, and I wonder with increasing perplexity, what am I missing?

As I speak with friends and fellow sojourners in the life of faith, I realize I am not alone. This book speaks to the growing masses of people who are just like me. Doubts compel us to head for the exits of our faith. We feel conflicted and guilty so we reach out, looking desperately for some help. We devour book after book, but what we discover are rational, logical, and intellectual arguments for the existence of God and the reliability of the Bible. That sinking feeling returns. The piling on of facts and evidence for God is almost counterproductive for chronic doubters like us. The books we read feel like eager suitors who are trying too hard to get the girl. For me, and many like me, standard evidentialist apologetics don't work so well anymore. There has to be a deeper calling to belief than correct answers and clever arguments—but is there?

This book is a struggle filled real-life discovery of that calling to believe in the midst of unbelief. It is the realization of faith as the better story first of all. A story that is less about informing the mind with facts and more about capturing the longings of a human heart in the midst of grand mystery.

### Target Audience

**Primary Audience** — The fastest-growing category of people in North America is the group that checked off "none" in the most recent religious affiliation census. This group is not only the fastest growing but also now the second largest. Christianity is the pipeline that is filling this burgeoning category of people. Indeed, there is a flood of "former Christians" who have left the faith, and intellectual, fact-based arguments are not going to bring them back. People are too skeptical and disillusioned for that.

It is my conviction that anyone in this vast category of people who sees the title of my book will immediately be intrigued by it. The title says what many people feel today. When they open its pages, they will discover a brutally honest wrestling match for faith that is centred around story, longing and mystery over facts, reason, and certainty. Anyone that has grown tired of "proofs" and "easy answers" to faith is going to love this book. Anyone who has wished to remain in the faith, but feels as though they can't because of their unanswered doubts, the undeniable screw-ups of

Christians in history, or any other reason, is going to love this book. People who are content to anchor their faith to evidence, facts, and proofs are not going to like this book, but if they stick with it, I believe even they will benefit greatly by being challenged to reorient their faith away from facts and toward the Better Story.

### **Secondary Audience**

People with non-Christian backgrounds will be attracted to this book. The book doesn't present an overly confident robust defence of the faith, it reveals an authentic struggle, so it won't be as easily dismissed by non-believers as Christian propaganda.

### **About the Author**

**Dennis A. Wilkinson** — Dennis is a life-long doubter. Like Ivan, he has been “haunted by great unanswerable doubts” for as long as he can remember. Dennis is also happily married to Mistin, who thankfully, doesn't doubt quite as much, and whose joyful spirit has kept their family more sweet than sour. He is the father of four inquisitive, confident, and very loud children. Dennis is a lover of great stories. Vocationally, he has been a pastor/urban missionary for a quarter century, and his first-hand experiences with angry atheists, jihad-threatening Muslims, and gay activists give him an invaluable treasure trove of applicable stories that make the contents of this book pop off the page. Dennis has a BA from Northland International University and a MDiv from Central Baptist Theological Seminary, and for the last 25 years he has read almost continuously from great apologists, philosophers and historians in an effort to help with his chronically skeptical outlook on life.

### **Similar Titles**

#### **C.S. Lewis — The Silver Chair / Surprised by Joy / The Great Divorce**

- It is Lewis' masterful touch that helps people see that beauty of a Better Story. Lewis was the one who first caused me to see the value of reorienting my faith around a desire for what is better more than a quest for accurate information.

#### **Dostoevsky — The Brothers Karamazov**

- When it comes to faith, desire always precedes proof. This conclusion is what kept Dostoevsky bound to his Christian roots even though he considered himself a skeptic. This perspective is not only seen in his surviving letters, but also in the characters Alexi and his chronically doubting brother Ivan.

#### **James K.A. Smith — Desiring the Kingdom / On the Road with Augustine**

- Smith picks up the trail that Lewis and Dostoevsky have already been walking on. He says things like “So before we are thinkers, we are believers. Before we can offer our rational explanations of the world, we have already assumed whole constellations of belief.” He speaks strongly of the “homesickness” we feel on earth when things are not as they should be, and stresses that these longings are pointers to God and we should listen to them.

Seven additional authors deserve an honourable mention. Though they don't fully get into the idea of believing the Better Story, they dance around it with marvellous wisdom and creativity and have been of great benefit in the creation of *Confessions of a Disillusioned Christian*.

1. Bruxy Cavey — The End of Religion
2. Robert E. Webber — The Divine Embrace
3. Deborah Hirsch — Redeeming Sex
4. David Bentley Hart — Atheist Delusions / The New Testament
5. Peter Enns — The Sin of Certainty
6. Peter Brown — The Rise of Western Christendom
7. Yann Martel — Life of Pi

*Confessions of a Disillusioned Christian* makes some vital contributions to the conversation. First, I'm not aware of any work in existence that attempts to take these many scattered thoughts that prioritize story, desire, and mystery over facts, reason, and certainty and coalesce them into a "Believe the Better Story" apologetic.

Second, what I've discovered over the last 25 years of urban missions is that standard evidence-based apologetics seem to be resonating less and less within our more skeptical, post-modern, "fake news" world. (Myself included!) Is there a way back to faith without such a fact-oriented intellectual base? There is and people are talking and writing about it, but to my knowledge a book does not yet exist that explores this path more fully.

Third, this book does not present as a confident, robust defence of the faith; it is instead a genuine struggle to believe, where the outcome in many places is in doubt. This conflicted style of writing will help skeptics, doubters, questioners, and the disenfranchised tend to trust it more. In the world of apologetics this sort of approach is rare, but desperately needed.

In addition to the principle influencers above, I interacted with well over 50 authors: Gary Thomas — *Sacred Marriage*; Simon Winchester — *The Madman and the Professor*; Benjamin Wiker — *Ten Books that Screwed up the World and Five Others that Didn't Help*; Roseria Butterfield — *Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert / Openness Unhindered*; Marshal Kirk Hunter Madsen — *After the Ball*; William P. Young — *The Shack*; Sam Alberry — *Is God Anti-Gay*; Schiff Stacy — *Witches*; Barton Priebe — *The Problem with Christianity*; Mark Clark — *The Problem of God*; Augustine — *Confessions*; Sarah Bessey — *Jesus Feminist*; Sue Monk Kidd — *When the Heart Waits*; Kate Bowler — *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*; Aldous Huxley — *End of Means*; Alan and Deborah Hirsch — *Untamed*; Robert Inchausti — *Subversive Orthodoxy*; James Emery White — *Rise of the Nones*; Greg Epstein — *Good without God*; Solzhenitsyn — *The Gulag Archipelago Vol 1*; Eli Wiesel — *Night*; Jordan Peterson — *12 Rules for Life*; Lawrence Wright — *The Looming Tower*; Victor Frankl — *Man's Search for Meaning*; Stephen Meyer — *Darwin's Doubt*; Malala Yousafzai — *I am Malala*; Rodney Stark — *How the West Won*; Richard Dawkins — *The God Delusion*; Thor Ramsey — *The Most Encouraging Book on Hell Ever*; Tim Keller — *The Reason for God*; Stanley Gundry (Editor) — *Five Views on Inerrancy*; D.A. Carson — *Collected Writings on Scripture*. Voltaire/ Foucault/Nietzsche's/Thomas Merton/Ivan Illich/ Northrup Frye/ William Blake / Tacitus / Eusebius / Francis Schaeffer / Freud / Hobbes /Rousseau / Mill / Mead / Kinsey / Friedan.

## **Distribution**

Between Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, my website and my blog, I have well over 10,000 connections.

I have been talking publicly and privately about Believe the Better Story apologetics for well over ten years, and people within my spheres of influence (The Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren, Apologetics Canada, General Baptist Conference, Mennonite Church of Canada, The Fellowship of Evangelical Baptists, Saturate, The Meeting House, ALPHA, Multiply and the Anglican Church in North America) have regularly asked me to produce something.

I am reaching out to every author that I quote in my book. I am confident that I will be able to get some endorsements in the coming months.

I have strong connections with Willingdon Church, Northview, Central Heights, The Village, Westside, and Christ City churches. These are among the largest churches in B.C. having a combined total of parishioners in excess of 15,000. This is not including my many connections with smaller churches in B.C. and the greater Vancouver area. When word gets out about my book, there will already be a large pool of people interested in purchasing it.

## **Annotated Table of Contents**

**Introduction:** *God seems absent, doubts abound, I feel nothing. What now?* A book for people who long for something more but have that sinking suspicions there isn't.

### **Part 1 — Let's get one thing straight: faith isn't facts**

**Chapter 1: Story over facts: Believe the Better Story** — Too many books try to convince readers Christianity is a true story. I'm only here to say I believe it's a better one—and that's enough. Believe the Better Story.

**Chapter 2: Desire over Reason: Follow the longing of your heart** — The heart of every worldview is faith, and the blood that pumps through that heart is desire. The question of belief is answered through our affections more than our reason, through our longings more than our grasp of information.

**Chapter 3: Mystery over Certainty: Don't be a know-it-all** — In the world of faith, it is ok to let go of the need to be right. *Trust* is letting go of our need to be certain. In defending the Bible so rigorously, in fighting for our proper understandings of God, we Christians have missed the whole point of faith. A faith that can say "I don't know, but I'm trusting God" will last longer than one that fills up page after page of explanations and proofs about God and the Bible.

### **Chapter 4: By chasing facts, reason and certainty, we have lost our way**

The story of God coming to redeem humanity in the person of Jesus exists to capture our imagination and shape the direction of our lives—not so we can prove it true in a scientific, technical, literal or even strictly historical sense. When I let the story speak to my deepest desires for redemption and divine love, I find my faith remains and my disillusionment is held at bay. Facts, reason, and even certainty are not the bad guys, they just need to know their place.

### **Part 2 — What makes a Better Story?**

**Chapter 5: A Better Story has judgement and reward** — “Dennis, why must you live in fear of judgment or with the expectation of reward? Why can’t you simply be the good person that you are. Why not just live in each moment and let that be enough?”

This is the good life, the better story, according to my friend and it has some attractive possibilities. But is it a better story? In this chapter, I share the contents of a six-month conversation that I had with her in which it becomes obvious that to disconnect the human from fear of judgement and hope for reward is to disconnect the human from his humanity which is actually not better at all.

**Chapter 6: A Better Story has love** — Here, I introduce readers to a woman from my community who was finding her heart captured by a Better Story, one that is open to freedom so love can blossom. Yet now she is trapped back in her native Saudi Arabia where she must revert to the story of submission that she grew up with. She and I both know that she will struggle under the weight of this lesser story. But the stakes are high for her: if she publicly rejects the story of her birth and believes the Better Story as revealed in Jesus, she will have committed a crime punishable by death in her country. Even though it’s forbidden, she now knows that fear-filled obedience is not a better story. Love—the epicentre of the Christian story—is the Better Story.

**Chapter 7: A Better Story has transcendent purpose** — Viktor Frankl’s observations about the human need for a “super meaning” above all else is fulfilled in no greater way than through the unique love story of Christianity. As our own stories of success and failure, triumph and defeat fit into the vision of this grand narrative, we can begin to see how the Jesus story gives birth to all the better things of life: hope, forgiveness, grace, courage, generosity, kindness, and self-sacrifice.

**Chapter 8: A Better Story has a creator** — In this chapter, I take readers to the moment my wife and I stood facing an empty crib knowing it wouldn’t be filled like we thought it would. Amid this pain, I realized that believing in a good creator over random chance wasn’t going to make life easier—but it would certainly make life better. Does believing the story *without* a creator God bring even a modicum of comfort during seasons of devastating loss? Not that I can see.

**Chapter 9: A Better Story has redemption** — Malala Yousafzai confesses that tribal warfare is all her people have known for thousands of years. The never-ending cycle of retribution and revenge is all she has ever known. She is brave enough to call for a better way, but she doesn’t know which way that is. I believe the better way is through faith in Jesus, the ultimate bringer of grace. If blunt justice is all there is, then none of us have any hope for lasting peace.

**Chapter 10: A Better Story has a helper** — Pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps is an attractive story, but it is not ultimately a better one. Unfortunately, religious people in particular have bought into this lesser story, by creating clubs full of smug, arrogant elites that look down on the lessers, who have failed to climb as high on the mountain of holiness. These hyper-religious people were the targets of Jesus’ most vehement attacks when he was on the earth. A Better Story is one that has outside help. When someone else is responsible for saving us, the vital antidote to unhealthy pride is provided. No story has more outside help than the Christian one. It is only in this story that we discover that it is God himself who has come to help us.

**Chapter 11: A Better Story has hope that reaches past the grave** — I prayed a prayer that might have been a bit too long, but I didn’t care. In it I asked that Tino might believe in the God who loved him and wanted to deliver him from death. He thanked me for the evening and we agreed to meet the following Thursday. Thursday never came for Tino; he died Wednesday morning. He was 48. As he passed through the vale of death, I know which story could have afforded him the most comfort, and I think he had begun to know it too. All of us must suffer, all of us must die—and there’s only one story that offers a hope bright enough to cut through the murky darkness of our own mortality.

## Part 3 – Story Killers

The sun is shining, all is well, and I'm skipping along with the Better Story in my heart. I've made room for story over facts, desire over reason, and mystery over certainty as the philosophical priorities in my life. I don't have a care in the world, as the warm sun of divine love warms my back and keeps out the cold.

The end.

But it's not really the end for me. This is where the rain begins to fall. It falls in cold hard sheets, its unrelenting at times, overwhelming. Life happens, and the story I'm believing and the life I'm living don't seem to agree with each other. Incongruence is a real bummer! The thunderclaps of disillusionment pour down on me. I wrestle, I ask myself: what's my problem anyway? If this is such a Better Story, then why am I gasping for faith in a sea of doubt?

It's those damn story killers.

**Chapter 12: Story Killer # 1 – Too much trouble with the Bible** – The best stories, it seems to me, shouldn't require a lot of caveats. Unfortunately, it's not that simple with the Bible—home to God's story.

- Better stories don't include slavery, but the Bible does
- Better stories don't marginalize women, but the Bible does
- Better stories don't endorse genocide, but the Bible does
- Better stories don't end with eternal torment, but the Bible does

The Bible is like a treasure map that points the way to Jesus. Sadly, I've treated the Bible more like the treasure instead of the map—but that's truly what it is, and an old map at that. It has some frayed edges, it's smudged in places, and there are some crease marks and unhelpful folds. Sometimes the markings are not as clear as we would like, but on the whole, it works. It leads people to Jesus. Jesus is the treasure.

**Chapter 13: Story Killer #2 – Too much pain and suffering** – The circumstances people must endure influence the overarching stories they believe. What I experience determines my belief, and not the other way around. In this chapter, I share some of the darker stories of my many friends and ask, how can any measure of confidence be placed in an overarching story filled with such brilliant light? If the Better Story doesn't chase away the darkness, what good is it?

I have very little to add to the tomes written on this problem of pain, but perhaps that's the best way forward. Over years of ministry, I've learned it's better for me to sit in the dust with the grieving, to curse with the devastated, to cry with the brokenhearted and to shake my head in sorrow with the crushed. It's better for me to stay away from asking the "why" questions when we suffer. The "why" needs to be replaced with the "what" question: what can I do to help? Shared pain is a great comfort to a wounded person. To have someone understand my pain is sometimes the only solace possible. Only in Jesus can we see God Almighty sitting in the dirt with us when we bleed and suffer here on earth. Jesus has all the same scars we do. For now, the bloody cross is enough to keep me turned toward the Better Story as I limp along in life.

**Chapter 14: Story Killer #3 – Too much silence from God** – Over the years I've discovered that many people will agree with me that the Christian story is actually the better one. Lesser stories can't hold up to the beauty, purpose, grace, love and goodness that make up the Christian story, but even still they won't believe. Why? They just can't *feel* God or sense his presence. "No offense, Dennis," they tell me, "but if this story of God is such a good story for humanity, then where exactly is this wonderful God you speak of?"

Even with my skeptical, doubt-filled inclination toward life, there are things that happen that seem to defy the possibility of coincidence. They are far from dramatic miracles, nor am I certain that anything divine is really going on. But as near as I can tell, the curtain of mystery is pulled back for just long enough to glimpse something more. Something divine appears and then is gone—something that points me in the direction of God. I’m like a dog who cocks his head and leans into the wind when he catches a faint whiff of something enticing on a gentle breeze.

**Chapter 15: Story Killer #4 — Too much fear and confusion surrounding sex** — Sadly, Christianity has a long history of fear and confusion surrounding the topic of sex. Western society finally cast aside these unhelpful restraints and reoriented us all around what is touted as a new and so-called better story: the story of sexual freedom. I learned firsthand that to question this “better story” comes at a great cost. Christians have lost the right to speak into society on this issue. Our sexual hypocrisy and hatred for others with different sexual ideology have made things worse in this new era. As recent polls suggest, perspectives on sex is now the primary reason why Christianity is no longer compatible with the majority of people in North America. Is there a way forward?

I do believe, despite all the discouraging news, that Christians can find a more solid footing again if we stop pretending we know it all, embrace choice over determinism, compassion over policy, and faithfulness over freedom as the key building blocks to healthy sexuality.

**Chapter 16: Story Killer #5 — Too much wickedness in Christian history** — Does the Better Story produce individuals whose lives are marked by character, virtue, honesty and love? If not, the story is worthless. Ultimately, the proof of a Better Story over another is not in the technical veracity of specific theological or historical details or in its handling of difficult questions, it is in the life that is lived as a result of its influence. While this is true, the crucial point to consider is not whether Christians have failed to live up to an ideal presented in the Better Story, but whether they have had the ideal in the first place. Christians, undoubtedly, have. The ideal Jesus as presented in his grand story is still the most beautiful one we have whether or not those who purport to believe it live up to its virtues or not.

## **Book Samples: Introduction and Conclusion**

### **Introduction: Confessions of a Disillusioned Christian**

Doubts abound, God seems distant, the Bible isn’t helping. It takes about three seconds on social media to see that Christianity’s a mess. I have far more questions than answers. People in the West are leaving Christianity in unprecedented numbers.<sup>1</sup> Why don’t I head for the exits like everyone else? There is so much I’m not sure of anymore, and the older I get, the more unsettled I seem to be about my faith. Forgive me if I’m not an overjoyed Christian in this season of my life.

Turns out, I have a pretty good reason to be a little bit grouchy right now. When Dartmouth College Professor David Blanchflower studied data from 132 countries examining the relationship between wellbeing and age, he pinpointed the exact age when humans tend to hit peak unhappiness. He found a “happiness curve” that takes on a U shape over one’s lifetime, and 47.2 is precisely the low point.<sup>2</sup> That’s me, right now! ‘Tis the season to be grumpy! And I am.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Rise of the Nones

<sup>2</sup> <https://slate.com/human-interest/2020/01/47-point-2-year-olds-on-study-claiming-this-is-the-most-miserable-age.html>

Maybe it's my circumstances? I'm just finishing up 10 years of the most grueling mission work I've ever attempted. While the last decade has had some great moments, it has also been characterized by adversity, rejection, abandonment, persecution, failure, exhaustion, and—for all the effort—little measurable fruit. I'm tired and discouraged. Perhaps if I'd been wildly successful, I'd be confidently writing a "how to" book on what it takes to grow a church or win people to the Lord, but that's not my story. The book I do find myself writing, however, is more than just raw reflections on a turbulent season of life. For years, spanning back long before this past decade of ministry, I have regularly experienced a deep unsettledness about my faith, a routine second guessing of my hope. This nagging uncertainty sits at the epicentre of my disillusionment. This book is about how I've wrestled with this life-long struggle to believe in the midst of unbelief and my attempt to answer the question: Why *have* I stayed in the faith, despite my doubts?

As I stumble through, I suspect that others will share my disillusionment with Christianity. It was C.S. Lewis who said "Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: What! You too? I thought I was the only one."<sup>3</sup> With this effort, I'm hoping to find some new friends, fellow disillusioned ones who resonate with the tortured soul from Mark 9:24 who believed and didn't believe all at the same time. I want to walk alongside those who long to experience God, but who for a multitude of reasons don't seem to be able to like they had hoped.

What is the cause of my disillusionment? It's the usual suspects:

1. Too much trouble with the Bible
2. Too much pain and suffering
3. Too much silence from God
4. Too much fear and confusion surrounding sex
5. Too much wickedness in Christian history

Many books address these issues in masterful ways, and I've read a great deal of them. I know the "right" answers; in fact, some of those "right answers" come up in this book. But even after all the compelling arguments hit their mark and the extensive, often powerful debating points on the reasons for God are clearly articulated, that niggling feeling in the back of my neck returns. The "yeah, but what abouts" begin to play in my mind again. My disillusionment always returns like rats to an old barn: it doesn't matter how hard I work to clean the barn or how many traps I lay out, the rats always return.

I've been fortunate enough to keep a personal journal for the last 31 years. Recently, on a silent retreat, I brought several of these aging, dust-covered windows-into-the-past with me. As I climbed back into my mindset from 15 and 20 years ago, my suspicions of being a lifelong doubter were confirmed. It would seem that I've regularly been dragging my feet to the grand banquet table of God. While the faithful reach hands skyward in worship of the Divine, I find myself, hands in my pockets, looking around the room and wondering what's the matter with me. Am I a fraud, just a poser? Why do I remain standing among the faithful?

The great-granddaddy of Western Christianity, Augustine, also wrote out a confession. It bears the unimaginative title "Confessions," but this fourth-century masterpiece could have its title expanded to say "Confessions of a Confident Christian." Augustine speaks of how doubts fled away from him after his

---

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis book, *The Four Loves*

conversion. He shares how God speaks to him, and how the other guys—the Manichaeans, the Arians and the Pelagians—got it all so patently wrong. Yes, Augustine confesses his sins and shares his doubts and struggles as he recounts his life story of transformation, and he is clear that he sees the Christian life as an intense struggle. But make no mistake, Augustine is confident that Christianity, as discovered in the Bible, is the truth—and everything else is lies. Even to question the authority of this premise is wholly inappropriate:

For it is not right for a man to call such sublime authority in question, or upon your Book, even if there are passages in it which may not be clear for we submit our intelligence to it and do not doubt that even those parts of it which are hidden from our ken are right and true.<sup>4</sup>

Augustine recounts the details of his own conversion. He was heavily influenced by the preaching of the educated and highly regarded Ambrose, who gave Christianity the intellectual street cred Augustine needed to cross over into belief. But his conversion was also underpinned by divine interventions: God healed him of a toothache. The power of a song in a church service “entered his ears and filled his heart.”<sup>5</sup> He witnesses a season of persecution end when the bodies of two ancient martyrs are discovered and paraded through the streets. The healing powers of these holy corpses cast out demons, healed a blindman, and stopped the persecution in its tracks. Augustine couldn’t deny these miraculous experiences. He became convinced that the love of God was real and open to him, so he entered into it and never looked back.

Augustine is the hero Christians want to be like. I have often wished I had his certainty, his lived experience and confidence in God’s love. But I simply don’t. Turns out I’m more of Dostoevsky man myself.

In a moment of candour, Russian philosophical novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky penned these words about himself in a letter to a good friend:

I want to say to you, about myself, that I am a child of this age, a child of unfaith and skepticism, and probably (indeed I know it) shall remain so to the end of my life. How dreadfully has it tormented me (and torments me even now) this longing for faith.<sup>6</sup>

It’s no surprise that Dostoevsky creates a tortured soul in his likeness in his classic novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. The man’s name is Ivan.

In the book, Ivan is never able to make peace with his doubts. Family friend Rakitin says of Ivan, “He has a stormy spirit. His mind is in bondage. He is haunted by a great, unsolved doubt. He is one of those who doesn’t want millions, but an answer to their questions.”<sup>7</sup>

Ivan’s unsolved questions turn into festering doubts in his soul, which in turn destroys his ability to believe in a good God, absolute truth, or even love. “All is lawful” he finally concludes, summarizing his belief that the world is a dark place without meaning, without God, without hope. In the end, the darkness of Ivan’s doubts takes active root in his servant and provides the underling with the justification to murder

---

<sup>4</sup> Confessions Page 333 Kindle edition.

<sup>5</sup> Confessions

<sup>6</sup> Letter To Mme. N. D. Fonvisin (1854), as published in Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to his Family and Friends (1914), translated by Ethel Golburn Mayne, Letter XXI, p. 71

<sup>7</sup> Brothers Karamazov

Ivan's father and frame Ivan's brother for the crime. When the shocked Ivan queries his servant about his heinous deeds, the answer comes crashing back on him: "All is lawful." Ivan loses his mind.

Ivan was caught in the clutches of doubt, hopelessness and fear. He knew that faith in a loving God would provide him with the needed deliverance. He even had a living example of the liberating power of trust in God —his saintly brother, Alysoha—but Ivan just couldn't step into the realm of faith, even though it would have made his life so much easier to believe. But faith, for Ivan, was too simple, too easy. He had seen too much of the way things really were. He had, as my non-Christian friend quipped one day on a long walk together, "seen how the sausage was made" when it came to religion. So Ivan remained entombed in his miserable reality, unable to attain a simple trust in God.

I identify with Ivan. With frustrating regularity, I find myself tortured by those "great unsolved" doubts about my faith. How is this possible? I was raised in a Christian home, went to a Christian high school and a Christian university. Just for good measure, I obtained a Master of Divinity degree at a Christian seminary. I even started a Christian church! If anyone should have a robust, unshakable belief it's me. But still, in quiet moments, the doubts flare up. Is the faith I cling to really true or is it all a hoax? A foolish game played by weak-minded people?

Often these faith struggles paralyze me—which isn't ideal since I work in professional ministry! It's no fun to believe and not believe at the same time. I often feel like a hypocrite, a fake, and a coward. There are times I want to break away from it all, but I have *just enough* faith to keep me among the faithful, yet wholly without joy. It's torture. I look around at other Christians who seem to be in touch with God, who love the Bible and are excited by their faith and I wonder with increasing perplexity, what am I missing? Is the truth about life and religion revealed in Phillip Larkin's clever verse?

No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade  
Created to pretend we never die.<sup>8</sup>

Have the infamous Thénardiens grasped the truth about our existence as they stumble around picking the pockets of the dead in the Broadway musical *Les Misérables*?

Well, someone's got to clean them up, my friends  
Before the little harvest  
Disappears into the mud  
Someone's got to collect their odds and ends  
When the gutters run with blood.  
It's a world where the dog eats the dog  
And they kill for bones in the street  
And God in His Heaven

---

<sup>8</sup> Larkin

He don't interfere  
'Cause he's dead as the stiffs at my feet  
I raise my eyes to see the heavens  
And only the moon looks down  
The harvest moon shines down!<sup>9</sup>

In contemporary North American culture, the door is wide open to leave the faith, and people in the west are abandoning the ship of Christianity in unprecedented numbers.<sup>10</sup> Why don't I just join the crowd? Is it because I do not wish to disappoint the many spiritual mentors who have invested so much in me? Am I playing the odds, participating in Pascal's cosmic gamble, going with God because he's the safer bet? Surely there is more to my desire to be counted among the faithful than that.

Right?

Dostoevsky and others like him have given me a glimmer of hope. Through them I've come to see that I am no fraud. Despite my tortured soul, there is a welcome place for me at God's table. What is it? What bit of help have I stumbled across that keeps me and the other Ivans hanging on, even though I know it would be so easy to let go?

My wobbly faith continues in spite of disillusionment because I've come to cherish the value of story over facts, desire over reason, and mystery over certainty. I spent so many years attempting to anchor my faith primarily to facts, reason, and certainty. I wanted to march confidently like Augustine, to have ironclad guarantees that what I was believing was 100% correct. I went to seminary to get the answers. I learned Greek and Hebrew so there could be no doubts. I've read book after book, proving there is a God, proving the historical Jesus, proving the reliability of Scripture, proving all the "facts" that make up the story. I don't regret any of these efforts to bolster my faith, but what I do regret is the amount of hope I placed in them. I think I was chasing something that doesn't exist. That perfect argument, that quintessential factoid that if uncovered would finally and forever remove all doubt. I wanted the historical silver bullet which would blow a hole in skepticism and create a faith built upon the firm soil of certainty. Such a thing doesn't exist, and chasing it, as I did, is what nearly destroyed my faith.

I believe it has been Christianity's understandable but mis-focused pre-occupation with facts, reason, and certainty that has been the cause of major upheavals in Christian history and is now one of the principal reasons for why people are abandoning the faith in such unprecedented numbers. We've lost our way.

It makes sense then, that the first portion of the book will look at the vital importance of story, desire, and mystery over facts, reason and certainty as the primary anchoring points of our faith, as well as some helpful recounting of how we managed to lose our way in all of this.

In the second portion of the book, I will share with you the results of a 10-year experiment. In sharing my faith with others, I forced myself over the span of a decade to ask people a single question: What makes up a better story? In the conversations that followed, one story emerged consistently as better. What I discovered is that by moving conversations away from what might be *true* to what might be

---

<sup>9</sup> Les Mis

<sup>10</sup> The Rise of the Nones

*better*, an environment of discovery rather than debate was created. It has been within this environment of discovery and comparison that faith has the best chance to grow for natural skeptics like me. If a better story does exist, it will rise like the morning sun above all the rest.

Following the bright sunshine of the second section comes the fierce thunderstorm of the third. If this Better Story is truly superior, as it seems to be, then why have I encountered so many “story killers” in the Bible? Can a story really be better when the holy book that presents it also seems to endorse slavery, the marginalization of women, genocide, and eternal torment? Can the story of a loving God truly be better when there is so much pain and suffering in the world? Why is the hero of this Better Story so silent? Why are Christians unable to agree on what the Bible actually says, or how to apply it? Is it more of a confusing story rather than a better one? Speaking of confusion, why has the Better Story created so much fear and confusion surrounding sex? Why do Christians seem to fight each other so much— shouldn’t a Better Story prevent that?

Does the “believe the Better Story” approach to faith actually hold up to the intense scrutiny that I put to it in the third section of the book? Does it remain better in spite of all these objections to the contrary? This book is the result of asking myself these very questions for decades. And at the end of all the questions, I remain a Christian, because I love the Better Story of creation, redemption, divine help and eternal hope. It is the best story the human has. It is the bright sunshine that rises above all the rest. But that reality doesn’t mean I’m not disillusioned; the thunderstorms of the third section are very real. Is there any hope that in writing this book, these tiresome clouds of doubt, disappointment, and frustration will finally dissipate so the light of trust in God will shine more brightly once again? I hope so, and I want it to be so for me and for you. Enjoy the struggle, my friend. Faith without struggle is like a muscle without exercise, and none of us really want that.

## **Conclusion: Confessions of a Disillusioned Christian**

For decades now, I’ve been gasping for faith in a sea of doubt. What has kept me from sinking? I’ve discovered that it is not facts, or logical reasoning, or some line of evidence or argument that could finally and forever buoy me up beyond the icy grasp of my misgivings. To my surprise, I realized that the more I thrashed about looking for that perfect argument, that final piece of evidence, the more I sunk.

What keeps my faith from the downward pull of Davy Jones’ Locker is a consistent re-orienting of my attention toward the story of redeeming love. I let that story whisper its truth into the deep longings of my heart. That’s where my faith lives. It’s not facts and data and proof. Living faith was never meant to be a science project. The more I learn this, the more I find I’m able to swim and not sink. The late American theologian and historian Robert E. Weber helps us understand why for so many, myself included, the empirical arguments for God no longer have their desired effect.

“But we no longer live in the modern world that privileges reason, science, and the empirical method of proving this or that to be true. Some bemoan the shift from the modern world. Some even hang onto the modern world because their theology is dependent on it. For them, the thought of thinking differently is threatening, so they do not want to go there. But in the postmodern world, the way of knowing has changed. We

now live in a world in which people have lost interest in argument and have taken to story, imagination, mystery, ambiguity and vision.”<sup>11</sup>

The good news of the Christian story must find its unique influence in every era, and for our time and place along history’s timeline, Webber’s point rings truer, to me, than any brilliant argument for the existence of God or the reliability of Scripture ever could. He continues:

“... We are called to this story, not as an idea that needs to be defended with intellectual argument as if its validity depends on proof, but we are called to enter the story by delighting in it and participating in it.”<sup>12</sup>

Living in a story instead of an argument keeps me floating. It’s as simple as that.

What am I to do with the story killers? They remain, and I wrestle with the knowledge that because of them I might never rise much above the waves that constantly try to pull me under. My faith floats, it doesn’t fly—but it hasn’t sunk, and that is saying something! And I have hope to fly one day. Personally, I worry more about Christians who don’t struggle with the story killers than the ones that do.

The Bible, to me, is more a headache than a help on some days. God is far more silent than I had hoped. The suffering we all must endure makes little sense to me. I have great sympathy and understanding for all my friends in this book who because of the great trauma of their lives find it utterly impossible to believe. Sexuality remains the Achilles’ heel of the Christian story and will continue to divide, fracture, and empty out our churches. The historian in me has seen enough wickedness in Christian people to know that the good news should do more to transform the lives of those who subscribe to it. No amount of clever argumentation or reasoning seems to be able to dislodge the darkness in my soul that exists as a result of all these observations.

In the end, I’ve stopped trying to figure it all out, stopped trying to have all the answers, stopped trying to make my faith safe, controlled, certain and easy. I’ve stopped trying to defend what was never meant to be defended.

The Better Story is the one that has judgment and reward, love and purpose, a divine creator, a redeemer and helper, and a hope that extends beyond our suffering and beyond our death. The Christian story is the only one that has these essentials for human flourishing laid out in such perfect measure. It’s simply the best story we have. The grand story of divine love coming to rescue humanity remains the gold standard of stories. It’s the story that connects best with the deepest longings of our heart, the one that captures our imaginations, and the one that fills us with wholesome visions for better things. It’s the story that gives us the best chance at loving our neighbour and healing our broken world. It’s the truest story we have. I’m on Aslan’s side even if there isn’t any Aslan to lead it.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> The Divine Embrace 17

<sup>12</sup> The Divine Embrace 28

<sup>13</sup>If you need the full story on this quote go back to chapter 2. Using his iconic character, Puddleglum, C.S. Lewis reveals in his masterful way that Jesus remains the better story, even when great darkness strains that possibility to the breaking point.