

FINDING A PATH THROUGH DOUBT,
DISILLUSIONMENT, AND DEAD ENDS

MID- FAITH CRISIS

CATHERINE McNIEL AND JASON HAGUE



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PART 1

SETTING THE STAGE(S)



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LET'S START WITH A MEME

A meme pops up on social media every now and then: How It Started v. How It's Going. Couples post first-date snapshots alongside celebratory wedding pictures. Parents post their newborn baby alongside their college graduate. One astronaut framed an old picture of his childhood self in a cardboard-box rocket ship next to a picture of his grown-man self flying a real NASA space shuttle.

We depict less celebratory things with this meme too: breakups, loss, decline. Things that started strong and fancy ending weak and laughable. But whichever direction the photos take us, we enjoy the contrast of time passing, change happening. We smile proudly, laugh uncomfortably. It's all so true, so relatable.

What would our faith look like in a How It Started vs. How It's Going meme? What was our fresh, hopeful picture at the beginning—and how do we look now?

For many of us . . . well, it's not pretty. Whether we began the faith journey in childhood or adulthood, we started full of earnest faith, hope, and love. But life has proven to be

complicated, and for many of us the faith we had at the beginning couldn't hold up to the challenge. Over time, our religious energy and excitement fizzled. Our prayer muscles atrophied. Our trust was shaken. The songs, books, verses, and even beliefs we once loved now vividly remind us of painful losses and disappointments.

What happened? Why the stark juxtaposition between how we started out in the faith and how it's going now? Simply put, we hit a crisis or two, or three. A mid-faith crisis, you might call it. As you've likely noticed, this is a common tale.

But before we jump into all that, let us introduce ourselves—and show you a bit of how it started and how it's going for the two of us.

JASON: HOW IT STARTED

For me, it started with bright lights and TV cameras.

The year was 1987. I was eight years old, traveling up the East Coast with a performing arts troupe made up of thirty neon-clad kids and chaperones. We didn't just believe in God; we were on fire for God. We performed in churches—Sunday services, youth groups, Vacation Bible Schools—and they loved us. But there was one extra-special stop on our itinerary.

“We're going to be on *The 700 Club!*” we exclaimed to our grandparents over long-distance phone lines. They gushed and gloated. Their grandchildren performing on the most popular Christian news program in the world? They just *knew* God was going to do big things. In between songs, I was going to be interviewed on air. Me! Speaking into the same mic Pat Robertson, Billy Graham, and Kathy Lee Gifford had used at one

time or another. Live, under the lights, cameras rolling. I had made the big time.

Ben Kinchlow introduced us. “Here they are: The King’s Kids.”

The lights came on, the music began, and we were off, singing and dancing and cheerfully proclaiming our lifelong intention to follow Christ.

Lord, we will live our lives for You,
Serve You faithfully like you want us to!¹

It was such an easy promise to make. The words just rolled off our tongues.

The audience ate us up, and why wouldn’t they? We were sincere in our faith, zealous in our proclamation, and glimmering with youth. Wherever we performed, the saints of our parents’ and grandparents’ generations gave us the same praise: God’s got big plans for you kids!

Then it was time for my interview. I don’t remember Kinchlow’s exact question, but it was something like: How did you get picked to be here?

My answer I remember vividly, because my mother pulled out the VHS tape at every dinner party. “That’s hard to say,” I told him, “because they’re not really the ones who picked me. Because God called on me, and he’s the one who picked me.”

Kinchlow blinked and took a step back. The audience gave something of a gasp. I knew I had impressed them.

That answer, along with Kinchlow’s flummoxed response, became legendary (at least, in my circles). “I saw your interview. You stole the show!” grownups would tell me for months after. “You give me so much hope for our future.”

PART 1: SETTING THE STAGE(S)

The videotape was destroyed in a flood (thanks be to God), but the prognostication rang in my ears for decades: “God’s got big plans for you, young man! You’re going to change the world!”

JASON: HOW IT’S GOING

Thirty-seven years after I polished my halo under those TV lights, after the world glimpsed my staggering potential, I have not changed the world.

In many ways, faith proved somewhat of a letdown early on. Life in my twenties and thirties was not about greatness and all about waiting. My wife and I went into full-time ministry just a few years into our marriage, and I went on to become a pastor. I was waiting for God to make good on all the promises I’d invested in. But while I waited, troubles came, and I was not prepared.

The first trouble was with my two sons. Sam was born with a heart condition that would require open-heart surgery while he was still an infant. While we were trying to keep Sam alive, Jack, his three-year-old brother, was diagnosed with autism. The kind with hard behaviors and meltdowns. The kind without words.

That initial combination pushed me into something else I wasn’t prepared for: depression. I felt spiritually and emotionally drained. Even after Sam’s heart condition was mostly resolved, the sorrow lingered as I considered my grim future with Jack, who was incapable of conversing with me. I had always been a people person, but soon I found myself isolating. I kept wondering why God was letting me languish in this kind of pain.

As the years went by and our family crises multiplied and intensified, another trouble set in: disillusionment. The evangelical church in America was being torn apart by political allegiances and scandal. Many of the communities, beliefs, and practices of faith that I'd always leaned on during times of hardship were crumbling. Heroes and mentors I had revered for almost two decades were being unmasked as abusers, a far, far cry from the Christlike path I thought we were walking together.

For the next few years my spiritual confidence ebbed and flowed. I was not prepared for any of this. What happened to the “big plans” God had for me? Somedays, it felt like I had fallen victim to a cosmic con, as if my faith was nothing more than a bait-and-switch.

I weathered the storm for a while, but then came the deaths. Two women, both dear friends of mine, were diagnosed with cancer while they were still young, in their thirties and forties. They were like sisters to me, and I lost them both.

That was when the full brunt of faith crisis hit me. Far from changing the world for Christ, I was awash in a multitude of griefs, accusations, and fears. I didn't dare tell anyone what was going on inside me. Instead, I went on with my work as a pastor, dutifully writing my sermons, hoping and praying that my secret grappling wouldn't disqualify me from ministry, wouldn't lead me away from the God I still loved and mostly trusted.

I had already lost my confidence. Then I lost my sisters. Now I feared I might lose Jesus too.

CATHERINE: HOW IT STARTED

My faith began more simply than Jason’s—and with fewer lights and cameras. I grew up in a dairy-farming community in rural Wisconsin, a small life in the small town my family moved to when my dad became the pastor of a small church in town. I was just four years old when our moving truck pulled up to the old parsonage, so this tight-knit community was the only home I knew.

I loved that my dad was the pastor. I loved listening to him bounce sermon ideas off us at dinner, loved beaming at him from the second row as my brother and I appeared in yet another sermon illustration. He was a great pastor, a servant in every sense of the word. He had a way of connecting the ancient wisdom of a text to the tangible needs of the people he deeply knew and genuinely loved.

Growing up as transplants in this multigenerational community—and far from our own extended family—the older folks become my grandparents, the younger families my aunts, uncles, and cousins. The church couldn’t afford to pay much, but there were other perks. Home was just around the corner from church, which was also my dad’s office, my school, and my second home. We visited the parishioners’ farms in the evenings, dipping our buckets into their milk vats and bringing milk home to drink. Chatting with the farmers in their milking parlors, we “helped” milk the Holsteins. Our freezer filled with meat during hunting season and our pantry with canned vegetables during growing season. We were invited to spend Sunday dinners and holiday meals around their tables, with their families. We were known and loved; we cared for others

and were cared for in return. To me, everything about this community was safe, was home.

At my tiny Christian school, my desk was a small, wooden cubicle, side-by-side with many others lining the walls of the schoolroom. Our self-guided lessons were easy and uplifting, and the wooden dividers that hemmed us in didn't feel restrictive. The carefully constructed walls and the carefully constructed curriculum embodied the warm, safe cocoon of Christian community, my Christian community.

CATHERINE: HOW IT'S GOING

When I turned twelve, it all turned upside down, all at once. My dad walked into an elders' meeting one night; when he left, we had two weeks to pack up and leave town. There would be no grace, no help, and precious few friends who would stick with us as we left. We just had to go. Leave the house, leave the church, leave my school, leave the community, leave my adopted grandmothers and grandfathers, leave my friends. Just get out.

I suppose the goal, from the church's standpoint, was to make this all as noiseless as possible, to erase us as entirely as they could. We were to leave no trace, nothing for anyone to think about or feel once we were gone.

This isn't the place to dissect the reasons behind the elders' decision; suffice to say there were real problems to address and change needed to happen. But erasure is rarely the best way to enact change or solve problems long term. It is utterly disorienting for a child, having one place that holds all your relationships, all your memories, all your identity . . . and then

suddenly and irrevocably being banned from that place—and that people. There were devastating losses like shelter, salary, and healthcare. But there were so many more intangible deaths, of everything familiar, everything that told me how to understand who I was and where I belonged. Once those two weeks passed, we were not invited to come back, and very few people stayed in touch. The door slammed shut behind us and locked on our way out.

There are laws now to make this level of destabilization and erasure more difficult to implement. We're taught to view pastors differently now too, as humans with human families and human needs. But back then, in our story, we were just sent away. We lost everything in the process.

That callous decision, made by the fathers and grandfathers of my church community but carried out collectively by everyone I knew, thrust me into an early mid-faith crisis. I knew for sure, at age twelve, that folks were never what they seemed, never truly trustworthy, that my family and I deserved to be abandoned, at any time, for any reason, and therefore might be again. How could I feel safe in any relationship, much less inside a community of faith? How could I ever join a group of Christians in worship and fully, genuinely lend my voice to theirs?

MID-FAITH CRISIS

If you're reading this book, chances are you can relate to some aspect of these stories. You've had your own mid-faith crisis or two; you might be in the middle of one right now. Maybe the crisis came up suddenly and blind-sided you, as Catherine's

did. Maybe you've been thrust out of your community, exiled and rejected by the most toxic people Christendom has to offer. Maybe you've been locked outside in the cold, and all you can hear from inside the church is the verse, chorus, and bridge of yet another hollow anthem you'd do anything to avoid.

Or maybe your story is more like Jason's. Maybe your crisis arrived not with a single heartbreak but with an accumulation of wounds and doubts, compounded by soul-level exhaustion. We absorb those blows for a while. Months, years, decades, even. We keep going to church on Sundays, keep serving, keep loving, keep praying. We may even keep preaching! But eventually, one too many straws lands on the back of that tired camel—one more dreaded diagnosis, one more fallen hero—and the whole edifice falls apart.

Maybe your story is quite different from either of ours. We have friends who realized they had been taught to view God as more hateful than loving, and to despise (not love) their neighbors as themselves—and no longer wanted to live or believe this way. Other friends realized they were in churches that worshiped and emulated power, patriarchy, or patriotism over Jesus. Too many people we know have been physically or emotionally harmed by pastors or Christian leaders. Plenty of friends were taught doctrines that just didn't hold up to scrutiny. And some simply describe their faith as melting away unexpectedly, like sugar in the rain.

So back to that How It Started vs. How It's Going meme. What does it look like for our faith journey so far? Some of these words might describe how it started for you:

PART 1: SETTING THE STAGE(S)

- Hopeful
- Joyful
- Excited
- Committed to a faith community
- Compelled by a sense of meaning and fulfillment
- Changed by God's love
- Inspired by heroes of the faith
- Spiritual euphoria
- Certainty
- Belief
- Tangible fruits of the Spirit

And how it's going?

- Disappointed
- Fallen heroes
- Poor treatment by the church
- Disillusionment
- Broken promises
- Scandal
- Hypocrisy
- Years of suffering
- Prayers unanswered
- Doubt
- God feeling distant
- Truth revealed as lies

Do any of these descriptors feel familiar? If so, you're not alone. We've been there too. We are there too, right in the

trenches with you. And we're convinced of two things: We can't stay here and aren't willing to go backward. We can't pretend we haven't seen and know what we have seen and know.

What options are left? We could leave the faith. That's what many folks we know have done, plus a host of high-profile Christians. When it gets too much—this soul-crushing weight of deconstruction and detangling, of wrestling with God, the Scriptures, and the church—we can walk away and be done with it all. For many, de-conversion feels like the only path forward.

But is there another honest path we could take, one allowing us to tell the truth yet search for faith? We were curious. We aren't the first people to hit a mid-faith crisis after all. We're not the first generation to deconstruct in adulthood what we'd been taught in our childhood or teen years, not by a long shot. Generations of believers have wrestled through questions like the ones we're asking now and have proposed truly compelling answers to those questions.

So we took a step back and did some digging. What we learned validated our own experiences of doubt and pain while also giving us hope for the future. We'd love to show you what we found, tell you a lot more stories, and consider together where we go from here.

Will you come along?

PRACTICE

..... *How It Started v. How It's Going*

Throughout this book, we'll explore a few practical components of faith for moving forward. We know all too well that some of the faith practices we were initially taught and held on to for years are not what we need now or in the future, yet we don't want to be formed by atrophy. If what we offer in these sections feels life giving, use or adapt them in whatever way feels useful to you.

Find a quiet place and consider the How It Started vs. How It's Going pictures from your faith journey. Depending on how you explore and express yourself, you might use words, art, or music to depict these—or whatever you prefer.

- How would you describe the way your faith started?
- How would you describe the way your faith is going now?
- What would you like your faith to grow into, eventually? What words or images would you use to describe that place?

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