




CHAPTER 1

God Talk

Theology

So, I'd like to learn more about the Christian faith.

That's great. I'd be happy to talk with you about that.




I know some things. My parents took me to church when I was a kid. But to be honest, I haven't gone much since growing up. I still think of myself as a Christian, more or less, but I'm not sure I'm a very good one.

Okay. I'm curious, though: What's prompting your interest now?

Some friends of mine had a baby a couple of months ago and invited me to the baptism. These are the first friends of ours from college to have kids, so many from my old circle of friends were there.

Was it a good time?



Definitely. But it was also kind of weird. I mean, one of my friends is very conservative, and he doesn't believe in baptizing babies.

He said that?

Not to the parents, but we drove to the service together and he told me that's what he thought. Some other friends don't go to church at all, and I have no idea what they thought about the whole deal. I got the sense they thought it was a quaint little ceremony.

And what did you think?

That was odd, too, because it all seemed really familiar—like from when I was a kid—and at the same time not familiar at all. I realized there's a lot about my own religion that I just don't know much about.

And it's important to you to know more?

Yes. I'd like to have kids someday, too, and if I have them baptized, I want to understand what it means and believe it. You know, I actually asked my friends who had the baby what the different parts of the baptism ceremony meant. They go to church fairly regularly, but they had a pretty hard time explaining it themselves.

I think it's probably not all that uncommon, even for people who go to church regularly, not to understand everything that happens there.

Well, it actually made me feel a little better to know I wasn't the only one who didn't know what was going on. I've been doing some reading since then—some about the Christian faith, but also stuff that's about spirituality in general and some books by people who don't believe in God at all.

And what do you think?

That I'd like to know a little more about the tradition I grew up in before I make any decisions.

I'm happy to help with that in whatever way I can. It seems like the baptism you attended has really sparked some soul-searching.

To tell you the truth, it's not the only thing. On the whole, it's been a pretty hard year.

We don't have to go into it if you don't want to.

No, it's all right. I think it will help if you know what's going on.

Then I'm happy to listen.

A little over a year ago, one of my best friends was in a car accident. She was hit by a drunk driver and is now paralyzed from the waist down.

That's awful. I'm really sorry to hear that.

Thanks. It really has been awful. I've been visiting her a lot, and I can't get over how much this stupid accident has cost her. She's had to work so hard, and she's had to deal with so much pain. She's not even close to living on her own yet. Even if she's able to accomplish that, her life will never be the same. It just seems so unbelievably unfair.

And you'd like some answers.

Yes. I don't know if there are answers, but I know I want to understand this all a little better.

I think that's an understandable response to this kind of accident.

And it's not just that. A few weeks ago, my mom called to say that my dad has lung cancer. He smoked when he was younger, but he quit when we were little, so maybe this shouldn't be so unexpected. Still, he's not that old and it's kind of frightening.

How is he doing?

They caught it pretty early, but cancer runs in our family, so it's hard to know how things will go. At least he's got great doctors.

How is the rest of the family dealing with it?

My dad plays it down; I think he's a little numb. My mom, though, is pretty anxious. I've got two siblings. My older sister goes to church all the time. In some ways she's like the friend I drove to the baptism; maybe a little *too* Christian for me, always explaining everything as part of God's will. When she said something like that to my younger brother about Dad's cancer, he nearly exploded. My brother is definitely not religious and he says he doesn't understand how my sister can believe in a God who lets things like this happen.

It really has been a difficult year.

Lousy, actually. And yet I know other people have it hard, too. Some people are out of work and others are in bad relationships. I know things could be a lot worse, but often I still wish they were a whole lot better.

I can totally understand that. How are you doing with all of this personally?

Some days better than others. I'm not sure what to think of it all, so mostly I've just been trying to help out—visiting my friend, helping my parents, trying to keep peace between my siblings. But I would like to understand it better.

What's been most helpful so far?

You know, it's probably been the time spent with my friend, the one who was in the accident. She's gone through stages of being really mad, and really sad, and all the rest, but she's also got this kind of quiet but amazing faith. It's not like my sister, who can explain everything away. It's more just like this confidence that things will, in the long run, be all right. I'm actually a little envious.

Say a little more.

Sometimes when I'm with my friend, she'll ask me to read something from her Bible, or she'll hum part of a familiar piece of church music, like "Amazing Grace," and I find it kind of comforting.

A lot of people find comfort in reading the Bible or in church hymns.

At other times, though . . .

Yes?

Well, I guess I don't want to believe just because things are hard. You know what I mean? I don't want to end up with some big psychological crutch, some false hope because I can't handle the truth.

The truth?

That maybe there isn't any God. That maybe this life is all we've got.

Is that what you think your friend's faith is—a psychological crutch, a false hope because life's been really hard on her?

No, absolutely not. She is very sincere, and you can tell what a difference her faith makes to her. But it doesn't seem to come that easily for me. I don't seem

to be like her. But I haven't quite given up yet, either, like I think my brother has.

There are certainly people who seem to believe very easily—though we may never know for sure how hard it is at times for someone who's gone through as much as your friend. But for others of us, faith can be a lot harder.

You said "us." Is it hard for you as well?

Sometimes when things are really hard for me or for people I care about, it's harder to believe. And at other times, all I have to do is read the newspaper and see all the pain and suffering in the world to feel like faith is very hard. But then, there are those times when faith helps me make sense of things, even hard things.

I appreciate knowing that, though I wish I had more moments when things felt like they made a little more sense.

Maybe our conversation can help with that.

Maybe. But . . .

But what? You can say it, whatever it is.

Well, like I said, I've been doing a lot of reading of late. And it just seems there are a lot of things about the Christian faith that are a little hard to swallow.

Like?

Well, like talk about a good God but seeing things like my friend's accident. Or hearing about miracle stories in the Bible but not really seeing any in real life.

Those are really big questions and, again, totally understandable given what you've gone through with your friend and your family.

I guess it just feels like a lot of things Christians seem to believe—miracles, the idea that Jesus was both a human and God, the resurrection—well, when you stop to really think about it, they all seem just a little . . .

Hard to believe? Crazy? A little out there?

Well, yes, actually. I really hope I haven't offended you by saying that.

Don't worry, you haven't. You might be interested to know, though, that the earliest Christians thought the same thing.

Are you serious?

Absolutely. It's right there in the Bible.

Where?

Actually, it's in all four of the Gospels. Each one says that when the disciples first heard that Jesus had been raised from the dead, for instance, they didn't believe.

Really?

Really. All four say more or less the same thing: those people who were closest to Jesus still had a really hard time believing that he was alive.

I don't remember learning about that in Sunday school.

Who knows, you might not have been taught it. But it's there. Listen to this story from Luke:

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. (Luke 24:1-11)