

Why I Lost My Faith in God

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For about a year now, I have been living without an active faith in God. This is a fairly big change from my life beforehand, where I claimed that I followed Jesus, was fairly heavily involved in a Christian group at uni called Student Life, and was a pretty regular attendee of my local church. So what happened? It's a fair question, and one that I, understandably, get asked by many people, especially Christian friends. So I thought I would save myself a lot of lengthy explanations to people as yet unaware of my reasons for this change by posting a (long) explanation here. Before I start, as a disclaimer of sorts, my reasons for this change are personal in nature. By that, I mean that both some details will be omitted, but also that these reasons are not based upon science or external objective arguments. I did not read Richard Dawkins' "The God Delusion" and suddenly see the light, so to speak. The decisions are based primarily upon my own observations and experiences (or, arguably, lack thereof), although not entirely.

Where to start? I guess a fairly important point to establish is that I was never a particularly "solid" Christian. I had my moments of sincere piety, many lasting for not insignificant lengths of time. However, by and large, my spiritual walk was very much characterised by long periods of "spiritual drought". That is, long periods where my faith didn't feel particularly real, and I wasn't practising all the disciplines of a Christian lifestyle (not that these are what make you a Christian, I know that... But the lack of them doesn't help your "relationship" with God either).

Even before all that, one of the primary motivating factors in my "conversion" to Christianity, when I "prayed the prayer" [of confession and surrendering your life to Christ] as they say, was to impress a girl I had a big crush on. Not a particularly selfless motivation, certainly, and very much focused on the approval of others as opposed to God.

Upon reflection, I would say that this theme of doing spiritual things to impress others would have been one of my motivations right throughout my "Christian walk". Again, not at all the "right" reason for pursuing holiness.

So we have so far: 1) a pretty terrible reason for becoming a Christian in the first place, and 2) a pretty dry and overall unfulfilling spiritual life afterwards. So you can see the foundations are pretty dodgy. That is not to say there were not periods of spiritual "strength", there were. Many times I was as sincere as I knew how to be in seeking God, His will for my life, and for Him to take control of my life and help me live for Him.

But ultimately, I felt like I was fighting a losing battle. In fact, I felt this so strongly that one night, lost in thought and unable to sleep, I "thumbed" a song on my mobile. I think it is a pretty good summary of my thinking at the time, and a few people I have shown it to concur it is reasonably well written and enlightening. In fact, I have put up an interactive version of the song on my (scarcely maintained) personal website, using some of the skills I have gained from my day job. It's worth checking out for just the cool JavaScript animations. See it at <http://www.greglockwood.com/innerbattle/>

Anyways, after a while of these struggles, doubts, and long periods of spiritual drought, a few events occurred that in effect, led me to make a conscious decision not to pursue a relationship with God any longer.

The first thing that affected me was seeing several close friends whom I regard very highly fall away or become apathetic about their faith. Seeing people close to me whose lives did not fall to pieces because they lost faith in God helped me to see there can be life outside of God. Maybe it was just me, but I (and I suspect a lot of other Christians) can become convinced that life without God is just a monotonous, purposeless drudgery, and that you must have a constant feeling of things not being as they should be (Christians often refer to this as a "God-shaped hole" in your life). Well, these friends who fell away, and now I myself, will gladly testify that it is simply not true. I, and millions of other people who don't follow Jesus, don't wander through life purpose-less and constantly miserable that they are not in relationship with the creator of the universe. Much as very few people wander through life feeling that their life would be complete and meaningful if only they had a relationship with, I don't know, Jennifer Hawkins (just an example). It's probably not the best analogy, but hopefully you understand my point.

Around the same time, somehow I came to read a very challenging sermon online, with an engaging tagline that the message was so challenging to the youth-filled audience that "the preacher was never invited back". The preacher was Paul Washer, and there are videos on YouTube (search for "Paul Washer shocking youth message" or similar), and audio and a transcript (the way I viewed it) at www.sermonaudio.com.

Why would a sermon cause my faith to waver? Aren't they supposed to bless and inspire you? Well, one of the resounding points that I got out of the sermon was that Western Christianity has become so diluted and has deviated alarmingly far from the Bible, and the standards described within. The preacher uses the passage that talks about the wide and narrow paths. Basically, this is where Jesus foretells that the road to destruction (i.e. Hell/separation from Him) is wide and many will tread it, whereas the road to salvation through Him is narrow and few will find it. Think about this for

a second... Jesus is actually saying that true Christians will never be a majority! They will always be in the minority. So, at the very least, I'm merely jumping on the bandwagon and joining the masses by choosing not to follow Christ, right?

The other, related point from that sermon that really challenged me was that authentic dedication to Christ is not easy, and that Jesus essentially demands complete willingness to surrender your will and to seek and carry out His. Maybe you're like I was, and prefer to have a bit of what I/you want (well, as much as you can get away with, anyway), and a bit of what God wants. If so, I encourage you to read the Bible and see that Christ doesn't really accept mediocrity or compromise like that. It's pretty much all or nothing. Think of the Ephesians passage which says "Amongst you there must not even be a HINT of sexual immorality", which is coupled with Jesus telling us that "if you have even looked at a woman lustfully, you have committed adultery with her in your heart". By Jesus' definition, I would argue that 99% of guys have more than a hint of sexual immorality! What about "Whoever puts his hand to the plow [talking about following Jesus] and looks back is not fit for service in the kingdom of God." That's prob not an accurate quote, but I know something like that is in there somewhere (I'm nothing if not specific). That's a pretty heavy call! If you even look back at your pre-Christian life (presumably with a sense of longing, or whatever), then it's, in effect, not good enough. Man! And you thought all you had to do was read the Bible, go to church and pray when you could!

So, being now alarmingly aware of what Jesus "expects", I looked at my own life. I came to realise that, if I was honest with myself, I really didn't want to surrender everything to Jesus. I didn't have it in me to give him everything, there were bits I wanted to hold on to. As explained above, according to the Bible, this isn't good enough. That isn't authentic Christianity. So, I realised, what is the point of Christianity at all if it is not "done properly"? What is the point of half-following Jesus? He won't accept you on judgement day for having mixed standards.

Putting 2 and 2 together, I got 3. After I double-checked my 7 pages of working, I realised I forgot to carry the 1. </SILLY> Ahem. Seriously, I coupled this realisation of the requirement of total surrender for authentic faith with my inability to wholly surrender and realised that I had a fairly compelling reason for not bothering at all.

This was quite convenient, if I am honest. My persistent doubts, my often poor motivations for doing Christian things (praying, going to Church, etc), my hedonistic attitude and my laziness combined with this new-found realisation to cause me to choose to stop actively pursuing a relationship with God. "I'm not ready", I was effectively thinking. The old rejection line used for centuries by girls and guys alike - "It's not you - it's me."

I told myself I would return to Christ when I was ready to fully surrender all those habits, thoughts, attitudes and decisions that God regarded as sinful. I still feel this to be the case. It would not surprise me if someone told me they had seen my future and that I was a church-attending, committed Christian once more. I know the theory of the Gospel, I know how good it can be to be able to trust God honestly and completely. So, as I mature and change as I grow older (I now know I'm not nearly as immutable as I once believed I was), it's likely I will once again be struck by what Christ did on the cross, and be willing to give myself over to Him.

Well, it's been at least half a year since I made that decision, and from my point of view (a temporal one ignorant of eternity), I feel it has been the right choice. I no longer live with a persistent feeling of guilt and inadequacy. I can freely enjoy what are ultimately harmless activities (at least to others anyway). I can relax on Sundays and not have to teach Sunday School, or go to church. I can watch Sunday night TV if I so choose! Basically, life is much simpler when living for yourself. I know what I want, where I could only take a best guess at what God wanted for me before. I work full-time at a wonderful web design company, which I love, and have hobbies and friends to catch up with outside of that. Life is good, overall. I'm not the miserable person some people think you are without Christ. In fact, I feel somewhat liberated. Which is funny, because they say that following Jesus is true freedom, but I've found the opposite.

Two more things (maybe). The first is that I still have a high respect for my friends who are Christians. I don't think you are stupid for having faith, and I am envious of your trust and ability to self-sacrifice. I am also fairly willing to keep re-evaluating my decision, and to discuss it with you in person or otherwise (although not always, there are times I don't want to talk about it). So don't feel we can't be friends anymore because of my decision, or that I have become one of those cynical, bitter ex-Christians who will fly into a rage if you say "God" or "Jesus". I'm slowly becoming like that, maybe. But I'm not there yet. :-)

Finally, one of the things you might be wondering, as I did (and still do), is how I could possibly abandon a relationship with God. I mean, He is reportedly the Creator and redeemer of the whole universe, for Christ's sake! (Phrase chosen fairly deliberately, if not entirely correctly) It is supposed to be a relationship like no other, providing peace, comfort, love and direction.

Well, one thing I would say is that it is perhaps the least fulfilling of any relationship I have had. Ask anyone, the basis of any solid relationship is good, two way communication. Now I know God gave us "His Word" with the Bible, but if you actually think about it, if you applied the same relationship model to a romantic, human partner, and claimed you had a "relationship" with this person, people would claim you were crazy! "It's okay", you'd tell them. "He left me a book, and I read that and know what He is like. And sometimes, I talk out loud to Him or direct thoughts at Him, and I just know that He hears me." I could say those words about, I don't know, Anne Frank. She left a book she wrote, so I kind of know

what she's like. But could I claim to really have a relationship with her? Not without being locked up!

"But it's different to that!" I hear you almost cry out. "He's God, He's everywhere, and it's not like earthly relationships at all!" Well, unfortunately, the only practical model of relationship we have is our flawed, human one. How can we truly understand any other kind? "Well", you say, "You can experience Him at work in your life, and His Spirit lives in you!" Well, I'm glad you feel that way, but the most I ever really felt "God" in my life was a tingle down my spine, which is fairly easily passed off as psychosomatic, and not very conclusive proof of an active and involved God.

But maybe I never *truly* accepted Jesus into my life? I guess it's possible, but unlikely. As far as I could see, and read in the Bible, I did it fairly "right"... A better answer, and my current thinking, is that I never, or only very temporarily, fully surrendered to God. But this is at best an educated guess, and maybe I'll never really know where it all went "wrong".

Well, hopefully that answers some of your questions. Hopefully you can also see that I didn't make this decision lightly, and can see some merit in my arguments. You can probably also see plenty of flaws, which is to be expected. Not only are we likely to have different understandings of the Bible and God and Jesus, but we also think differently and have had different life experiences upon which to base our thoughts and decisions on. Plus, I know there are at least a few holes in my logic. In those cases, you can put it down to believing, as almost all of us do, in what is convenient, rather than what is true.

I know you don't need my encouragement to leave comments below, as this is quite an emotional issue. I may write a follow up note or two, and if anybody wants to catch up with me in person to discuss this in greater detail, contact me via the contact form, I'm reasonably willing to catch up and have you lovingly show me why I'm wrong. :-) I do want to keep revisiting this decision, as I kind of need to make the right decision, as, if the Bible can be trusted, my eternal fate hangs in the balance.

That's it. If you've got this far, congratulations, your reward is I will shout you a beer or beverage of your choice if you want to catch up. Thanks for reading!