

ONE

How It Started

For anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who search for him. (Hebrews 11:6, NEB)

I don't know where the venue is for your emotional low points. Maybe it's your bedroom during the dark hours of the night when you fret instead of sleep. Maybe it's in the bathroom on Sunday morning when the confusion and pressure of preparing your family for church is exasperating. Maybe it's in church after a heated argument with your husband as you sit piously and reflect on your unchristian behavior. Maybe your single lowest point is a memory so powerful that its place is an icon to your doubts, your sadness, or your frustrations.

Mine is like that. It is in my basement, in front of my washing machine. It was there that I collected all the discouragements of the week, swept them into a pile, and cast them into the air to settle on all my thoughts and reflections. Gathering and ruminating during that time in my life finally led to a period of doubting that tried the faith of my young adulthood. Perhaps you have not had such dark troughs, but I have. My story is one of doubt, great grace, and powerful providence. To be honest, I am thankful that I had to journey through it. In the end it was the tunnel to the road of a maturing faith. I tell it now to encourage you on your journey.

I stood before my washing machine in the basement of the parsonage and ground my teeth with frustration as I loaded yet *another* batch of dirty diapers into the washing machine. My husband and I had recently moved to a new church, I had delivered a new baby, and the pressing demands of my three small children were overwhelming. The washing machine represented the never-ending tedium that filled my life. I felt as if I had spent more emotional effort doing mindless tasks than I had on the grueling work required for my schooling. I cleaned up after children, changed diapers, slept rarely, washed mountains of clothes, cooked—all the thankless tasks involved in rearing three children five and under. The loss of control over much of my life kept me groping for some handhold in the downward spiral of my thoughts. I recognize now that some of what I suffered was postpartum blues, isolation that comes from being fully occupied with small children, the losses of leaving the routine of one church and trying to settle into another, and an inability to communicate with a husband struggling with his own sense of loss during that transition.

Before many weeks, the physical, emotional, and mental turmoil at the core of my life spilled onto the shores of a young, lightly tested, free-floating faith. The pulling vortex that had begun in my mind, body, and emotions increased as I began questioning my spiritual beliefs. The walls of this whirlpool became more and more slippery, and I could not slow my descent into a darkness that St. John of the Cross describes as the “dark night of the soul.”

While I now have a perspective on what God was doing then, what I needed to surrender, what exacerbated the situation, what could have helped, what lessons the dark times taught about God’s faithfulness, and what useful purposes the

experience served for the benefit of others, I could not recognize God in any of it at the time. Like Lynne Hybels, I found it very inconvenient to lose my faith as a pastor's wife.

And lose it I did. At least it felt that way. I sat in my customary pew at church, looking around the sanctuary and considering the futility of all the mortar and brick, the words from book and hymnal. *What if there really was not an eternal God?* It seemed a considered possibility, and the thought of it left me almost breathless with darkness. *What was the purpose of repeating the empty words and songs? Was there any point to two hundred people coming together except to generate social connections?*

In my darkest hours, the possibility that this faith stuff could be meaningless enveloped me. I continued in the routines of church, shaking hands, smiling, singing in the choir; yet a hollowness of spirit followed me. One Sunday, in quiet frustration, I began a bargaining process with God.

God, if you are there, show me. For weeks I waited. Nothing.

OK, I countered one Sunday, I'll give a little.

It seems that arrogance and control were both part of the issue, but my heart was impatient at the darkness of my thoughts. My honest doubts drove me. I continued the bargain. *OK, God, I'll start with belief that you are. Can you work with that bit of faith and show me who you are?*

I waited, considering the pledge. I closed my eyes and repeated my bargaining. *God, you are.* It was a difficult step, but speaking those words marked a beginning. Over the next few weeks I felt confirmed in the thought that if I came to God believing that He was, He would identify himself to me.

After a time I took another step—slowly, honestly, fully expressing my doubts to God.

God, I will choose to believe that you are there and that you will reward my efforts to find you. I am not convinced of this yet, but I will give ground on this subject and begin with that little grain of belief. Now, please, please, confirm these things to me.

Audacious as it seems, it was a contract—an honesty I had not heretofore adopted. As a twenty-something, I had never let myself come to the point of facing my doubts squarely. I kept shoving them into a place where they could not be seen by me or others. I might poke my finger into the darkness, but I had not dragged out the contents and confronted the pile of questions in the light of day. Now, at thirty-something, it would happen because of this pivotal darkness. I pulled out the pile and spread its dark contents onto the dimly lit floor of my soul. This time, however, I invited God to help me consider the pile.

There was no immediate release or settling of faith. But I was satisfied that this was the only way to begin.

While the shadowy questions lay strewn about in my heart, outwardly life appeared normal. I went to church, managed to attend three services a week, and kept home and hearth running. It was a constant chore to continue the apparent normalcy, but I did. Some days I would stop the car before turning onto my street and pause, considering what might happen if I simply drove away to some unknown freedom and not return. In the end, with great effort, I corralled my thoughts and proceeded to the mundane tasks before me.

It seems God had accepted the honest bargain of a weary, empty heart, and He proceeded with it. Slowly He began to mend and reorient my heart. A friend of mine understood that I

was going through something very difficult and recommended to the church board that I be given finances to attend a weekend retreat for those in ministry. That weekend was a step in my climb back into God's felt grace. With increasing frequency God revealed His heart of mercy until I no longer questioned, nor have I since doubted the existence and love of my Father. It was a layered process, but building a reasoning, maturing faith is often best accomplished in gradual steps.

One afternoon on my path to recovery, after attending a small group about the disciplines of Christian life, I sensed that I should consider the topic of obedience to the "voice of God," whatever that might look like. The bargaining continued.

OK, God, I'll consider this and try to follow this obedience concept. You know you will need to increase my compliance. It is not something I can do alone.

I collected my two preschoolers from the nursery at the church where the group met and decided to take them to a park for an afternoon of play. I was unfamiliar with my new neighborhood and had no idea where a park might be located. Feeling especially trusting, I reasoned, *I'll try this "God, lead me to a park" thing and see if it works.*

I began turning randomly down the streets of my community and soon came upon a small park attached to an apartment complex. *How delightful for God to direct me to this park,* I thought. Or, maybe it was just coincidence. Hmmm.

The children tumbled out of the car and raced to the swings perched in an open field of green. I settled against a low wooden fence nearby and rejoiced in the warmth of the day. I closed my eyes and let the sun shine on my face.

I sensed God's presence. *There is a woman on the other end of this fence, and she needs your help to hear from me today,* He murmured.

Startled, I opened my eyes, surprised to see a young woman watching a preschooler romp about the play area. She appeared to be in her second trimester of pregnancy.

Jesus, I can't do that. She would probably be offended. This is not something I feel comfortable doing.

He reminded me: *Did we just have a conversation about obedience to the voice of God not ten minutes ago?*

I paused, lingering as I tried to manage some small courage. *Just remember I can't do this on my own. You need to open the door.* I was midway between hoping that the door would not open and wishing I could see God at work, when the lovely auburn-haired woman edged over to my end of the fence.

She began chatting amiably about her son and her life in the apartment complex. I asked about her due date, and she looked at me for a moment. Her eyes lingered on my face, and worry filled them with shadows.

"I am due in four months," she said, then paused. "I just lost a baby a year ago through miscarriage, and I am so afraid this pregnancy will not be successful that I can't sleep." Her lips drew thin with disquiet.

I understood now why God had directed me to this park. This was way past the possibility of happenstance; it was divinely coordinated providence. I listened until I was sure she had expressed all that she needed to before I began.

"Four years ago the same thing happened to me. I lost a son through miscarriage after five months of pregnancy. There was guilt, questions I couldn't answer, and pain in my heart. After a few months I became pregnant again. I lived in anguish like

yours, afraid this baby would suffer the same fate as the last one until one morning I talked to God about my fears. I told Him all that was buried under my attempts to be brave. When I was done, I gave my future to Him and left my unborn child in His hands. From that point on I knew that He cared and would be with me. He released me from my fears, and I learned to rest in His love. The happy little boy climbing up the slide over there was the baby that was safely delivered at the end of that pregnancy. But I have God to thank for the peace I experienced during most of that time.”

She stared at me and swallowed. Her eyes softened as she brushed her hair back from her cheek in thoughtful silence.

We spent twenty minutes or so in deep conversation. She questioned me, and I answered with what I can only say was God’s assurance for her. When we parted I was amazed at the providence of this God I had questioned and deeply doubted not long ago.

In this and many other ways God began to confirm himself to me. I came to cherish the verse in Hebrews that says “he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6, NKJV). It seemed to explain the process that gave me hope and faith in a loving God.

While in the middle of the darkness, however, I cast about for a book or journal or accessible route to take me back to firm ground, but I could find little that helped answer my questions or gave me support as a pastor’s wife. My graduate research had given me practice in the skill of asking questions, gathering and analyzing data, and drawing conclusions. I wondered if God could use any of these proficiencies to help others who experienced what I had. In an effort to determine if other pas-

tors' wives endured this darkness, and if so, what contributed to it, how they coped, what steps resolved it, and what they had learned from it, I developed a questionnaire that I hoped to distribute to other pastors' wives.

My first attempts to find answers were encouraged by Dr. Cecil Paul, a psychology professor. He graciously consented to distribute the questionnaire to another group of pastors' wives in Ohio, and I collected and analyzed the data. He was the first among many who believed in the value of helping pastors' wives through this tool.

The subsequent development, distribution, collection, and analysis of this questionnaire have been aided by a host of wonderful people including the Women's Ministry of the Church of the Nazarene, Focus on the Family, Sheppard's Ministry, the counseling staff and faculty of Roberts Wesleyan College, faculty colleagues from Asbury College and Houghton College, and, most of all, ministry wives around the world. It has been distributed in Kenya and in Hungary and translated into three languages.

As I share the results of the responses I received from women in ministry in the United States, it is my hope that you will find support and comfort from those who have had common experiences. I have also looked at surveys done with diverse ministry wives and have gathered the themes common in these answers so that what is said is supported by the voices of many.

The pastors' wives who completed these questionnaires gave important advice on problems they faced, the ways they have managed difficulties, and the joys that encouraged them. Collectively they have spoken and shared their insights, and you now have the opportunity to hear from all of them.

It is unacceptable that you should ever feel as if there is no hope or that you are alone and cannot find someone to come alongside you. There is help for the challenges you face from veteran pastors' wives who have seen the grace of God sustain them in all manner of circumstances.

■ FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

1. Can you identify with any of the emotions expressed in this chapter? If so, which ones speak to you?
2. Do you think ministry wives have a more difficult time than most women? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. What do you think this statement means? "It is a terrible thing to waste a crisis."
4. If you have reached a place of overwhelming doubt, discuss this with God even if you question His existence. Read Isaiah 1:18. What do you think it means? Are there some issues that you don't feel comfortable reasoning about with God? Examine these. Can you determine why you feel that way?
5. Both David and Job have written of their conversations with God. Read their exchanges, especially Psalm 88. Can you identify with David's sentiments? Does it seem reasonable to express these feelings to God?

The book of Job, according to William P. Brown, is primarily about Job. It charts his journey through doubt to a new paradigm of faith. Job pulls out many of the hard questions about God that humankind has asked, and in the end God says to Job's friends, "you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7). Brown suggests this means Job's honest questions and feelings were acceptable to God. In James 5:11, Job is commended for his perseverance. When Job thinks

to be silent before God and not express his frustration, God tells him to be a man and speak his thoughts (40:6-7).¹

God says to you, *Come be a woman of courage and speak to me of these things in your heart. It's OK. Tell me all you think and feel.*

Let's take a look at the survey tools used to ensure that the answers given in this book really come from ministry wives in the trenches.