

# Looking for Faith

By : mikeybear

Searching for authentic faith is hard. We find so many more answers than we do real questions. This book looks at some of the basic Christian themes and encourages us to ask new questions - for it's often the questions that renew our faith.

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## Looking for Jesus

You've picked this book up because you were meant to do so. You've picked this book up because you have the strangest feeling that despite all the wonderful books you've read, movies you've seen and conversations you've had, you still don't have the answer. The problem is not that there aren't a million answers, there are. Every week there's a new best seller giving the latest answer. The purpose to life, the meaning of it all, who you are, who God is, what's important and what's not. And you've read the ones that seemed to speak to you. You've read of other people's conversations with God and Koans that turned your brains inside out. You've struggled with the answers, wondering one minute if you're worthy of it all, and despairing the next.

I think I may know how you feel. I felt the same way. I spent so many hours of so many days, of so long a time, just wrestling with the answers. God's will, and my will. karma and coincidence. Religion and Spirituality. Walked the labyrinth and meditated to the harmony of a singing bowl. So many answers that seemed easy but ended up being so complicated they led me nowhere. I felt like Job wrestling with the problems of life only to learn that each answer only left me in a worse place than the one before.

Not surprising really. We're a world full of answers. Most religions seem to teach them. Sometimes it feels as if the questions were an afterthought to the answer. You know, "This will make you happy" is the answer so the question must be "What do I need to make me happy?"

You're going to have to be really brave to read this book. This is not about answers. This is not another one of those "read this and everything's going to be OK" books. This book is simply about the questions.

Are you religious? Perhaps you're a Christian? You've probably been taught that questions are dangerous. Well, they are. The right questions can lead you to the truth. The right questions can make all the difference in the world. Don't worry, I'm not going to try to convince you to change your religion. I'm not going to try to get you to change your denomination. I'm not going to ask you to change anything except your attitude to life. Rather than looking for answers, or even "the answer", we're going to look for questions. Big questions.

So, why questions rather than answers? Well, firstly there's the simple truth that in reading this you admit that you're not completely happy with the answers you have. Of course you don't readily admit that to anyone else, they'd think you weak, or lacking in faith. But the truth is that there's a nagging doubt. Even the answers that you trust implicitly, there are moments when you feel their depth and know that the amount of weight they will hold is limited. You have to protect them, be careful not to jump up and down too hard on them. There's that terrible fear that if you were to fall through there'd be nothing on the other side and you'd fall forever.

The sad truth is that you're right. They may be good answers. They're the ones you grew up with, or they came with lots of "weight". There was the power of the Holy Spirit in the answer! There was the presence of Christ! They came from trusted loved ones. They may be good answers, the best, but not enough.

Nor could they ever be.

The fact is that we don't find "truth" in answers. We find it in the questions! It's a paradox that has to be experienced before you can understand and find it. We are not judged by the answers we choose, but by the questions we ask.

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In this book you're going to see Christianity through a different lens. My hope is that each chapter will create questions in you. My dearest hope is that you will live with these questions and find a truth that can be lived. Ready? Then let's go.

### Jesus - The Beginning.

I believe that Jesus is the Son of God. However, I think it's pretty safe to say that when he was alive very few people understood how special he was, especially before he began his ministry. To the average first century Jew Jesus was simply a second class Jew, someone who had been conceived out of wedlock.

We tend not to think about what that means, but I've found it very helpful to think it through. Jesus was probably not thought of as a 'Good Jew'. (Deuteronomy 23:2) He was probably not allowed to marry a Jewish girl of reputable parentage, nor would he be allowed to worship in the temple with the other Jewish men. He was allowed to walk on the outskirts of the temple in the portico of Solomon, and he was allowed to worship in the court of Gentiles, but he was not allowed to worship with Jewish men. No wonder he overturned the tables of the money changers in anger, it was the only area given to him for worship.

Jesus would probably have lived his early life believing he was worth less than those around him. He was not allowed to be a witness in a court or law since his illegitimacy would be a mark of distrust. He was an outsider in many ways, which I believe explains why his ministry was often to the marginalised and rejected in society. He himself had been marginalised and outcast in many ways himself.

Scripture doesn't tell us what prompted Jesus to be baptised, only that the event changed his life. Mark's Gospel doesn't even mention any of Jesus' life prior to being baptised; as if it's not important. However, if Jesus was 30 years old when he was baptised we have to wonder about his life up until that point; even if it's just conjecture.

Imagine what it would have been like to have lived your whole life believing you were worth less than others, only to meet God in your baptism and be told by God "You are my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Mark 1:11. No wonder he went off into the 'wilderness' to wrestle with it!

The Gospels talk about Jesus being tempted. According to the Gospels he's tempted to turn stones into bread, grasp power to rule the world, and throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple. Why?

Imagine if the foundations of your religion, your belief system, were suddenly rocked. Jesus had believed that he was less than others. He had been conceived out of wedlock. I doubt there was a day it wasn't on his mind. It was unfair, but explained as God's will. But here God was telling him that he was God's own son, worthy and loved. God was pleased with him. How could God be pleased with someone who had been conceived out of wedlock? Even if no man had touched Mary before his birth Jesus had been conceived of the Holy Spirit. God had broken God's own law. That made no sense!

After a while he came to realise that he had a choice. Believe in the God who met him in his baptism, or continue to believe what he'd always been taught. I wonder at what point Jesus realised that the prejudice he'd accepted all his life was not the 'bread of life', the will of God, but simply a huge boulder he'd carried on his shoulders for so many years. How many teachings, ways that he'd been brought up to believe were the 'bread of life' were truly just stones that he'd carried round? And now, how great the temptation to turn those stones into bread! How tempting to simply believe what he'd always been taught rather than trust in this new experience and accept a new way of believing. In scripture we have a story of Jesus being tempted by the devil, and he rebukes him by saying "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God". He made his choice.

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The second temptation must have been a real shock to him. If he was to truly follow the voice of God, above all else, then he would have to give everything; his will, his love, his life, all he had, to God. That meant holding nothing back. Anything kept back would be a lack of trust in God. 99% loyalty is 100% disloyalty. It didn't matter whether he wanted all the kingdoms of the world for himself, or a few drachma that would be his fallback, position if everything went wrong, he would be placing his trust in something other than God. To worship God is to worship nothing else, and if anything is thought to be more important than God, then that thing is God. He chose to give all.

Thirdly, I wonder if a panic set in. If he gave all to God how could he be sure that God would care for him? If he were to focus on ministry, how would he know where the next meal would come from, or the bed for the night, or money for tax, or anything needed to survive in 1st century palestine? It was so tempting to put God to the test. Place himself in a dangerous situation and see if God comes through. Perhaps throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple. If God caught him then he'd know. If God didn't catch him, well â game over.

Then he realised, you cannot put God to the test. Lets say God caught him and he was safe. No rule says that God would do it again. Besides which, if God did save him he'd forever trust an event and not God. No, there is no guarantee of safety, nor can there be. There was love. Trust it or don't trust it â those are the choices.

Jesus chose to trust, and his ministry began.

Questions.

In what way does the above scenario differ from what you were taught?

What about this scenario makes you uncomfortable?

In what way can you relate to Jesus in this story?

How have you been tested, and what did you learn?

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