



## If God Disappears: When Everything Goes Wrong

By David Sanford

*My love for God, joy for life, and peace were shattered. In their place I felt angry, deceived and desperate for a way out of my family's nightmare.*

Many Christians around the world think of Adoniram Judson as an outstanding missionary hero to Burma. And he was—eventually.

After a handful of converts, less than a thousand printed copies of his translation of the Gospel of Matthew, and his subsequent work translating the rest of the New Testament, Judson—who knew full well that missionary life could be intolerable—lost everything. Or so it seemed.

Judson spent nearly a year and a half as a prisoner of war, at times despairing of life. His wife risked her life to visit him, pleading with Judson to not give up. After his release, she died, followed half a year later by their third child.

By that point, Judson experientially lost his faith, quit his work, angrily set fire to part of his possessions, and became a [jungle hermit](#).

Like Elijah in 1 Kings 18, he ran away and wanted to die.

### **We are all vulnerable**

The problem is, Elijah was not the only biblical hero who experientially lost his faith. What happened to mighty Judge Samson (Judges 14-16)? What happened to powerful King Saul (1 Samuel 15-31)? What happened to wise King Solomon (1 Kings 11)? They all fell away.

What about the good kings of Judah—Asa (2 Chronicles 16), Joash (2 Chronicles 24), Amaziah (2 Chronicles 25, 2 Kings 14), Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26), and Hezekiah (2 Kings 20)? They followed God for a number of years, then each one turned away, at least for a time. They did not lose their final reward, but they lost God's blessing for staying true to Him until the end. We see this throughout the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, the single greatest warning from the Gospels and Acts to Romans, Jude and the book of Revelation is: Persevere. Keep following the Lord. Endure to the end. Don't fall away. (See Matthew 13:1-9; Romans 12:12; 1 Tim. 4:16; Hebrews 11; James 1:12; Jude 1:20-21 and many other passages of Scripture.)

The New Testament adds additional warnings to Christian leaders:

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded” (Luke 12:48).

“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2).

“... We who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1).

Of course, for many years I thought these biblical warnings didn't apply to me. I was wrong.

### **A time of crisis**

A decade ago, while I was serving as vice president of publishing for the Luis Palau Evangelistic Association, working with publishers in 36 languages around the world, I was hit with a rapid-fire series of crises: emergency surgery for my oldest daughter, unexpected house repairs, two vehicle breakdowns, and a stack of unpaid bills. I felt the hand of God was crushing me financially and every other way.

*How could God do this to my family?  
This isn't fair!*

My love for God, joy for life, and peace were shattered. In their place I felt angry, deceived, and desperate for a way out of my family's nightmare.

In my despair—and I say this with trepidation—I doubted God's character. Finally the day came when I couldn't read the Bible anymore. Not a single verse. I couldn't pray, not even over a meal, for days and weeks on end. And this happened even while I was working on Christian books in a laudable ministry.

Experientially, I had lost my faith. Why? Because I had failed to heed the clear warnings of Scripture. And because I'd let the circumstances of life temporarily overshadow what I *knew* to be true. At a result, I couldn't fall asleep at night. I couldn't get rid of the stabbing pain in my chest.

Thankfully, God renewed my faith when I started taking several simple steps of obedience. I forced myself to open my Bible, read a verse, and honestly answer the question, "Do I believe it?" To my surprise, I said "yes." It wasn't a big "yes!" But it was enough to prompt me to read another verse, and then another.

At long last, I felt God speaking to me again. I started praying to Him, as well. To my surprise, He wasn't angry at me over my crisis of faith.

In time, my faith was renewed in a remarkable way.

Since then, I've talked with many other people about my experience. Not because it's dramatic, but because it's true to life.

### **Gateway to greater ministry**

At some point, every Christian has or will face the temptation to experientially lose his or her faith. I am not talking about losing one's salvation. Instead, I'm talking about losing one's faith in God, the Bible, the Church or Christian beliefs.

We see this throughout the Bible, Church history and contemporary experience. No Christian is exempt. Not even [Billy Graham](#), who suffered a profound faith struggle in the late 1940s, shortly before his evangelistic ministry captured worldwide media attention. Not even [Mother Teresa](#), who had a close, vital relationship with God until she started fulfilling her calling in Calcutta, India. Suddenly, prayer, Scripture, music, meditation and other spiritual disciplines felt dry. Except for a marvelous five-week reprieve in 1959, that remained true to her dying day. Yet she obeyed God's calling.

In biography after biography, in interview after interview, I see the same pattern. God allows us to go through a deeply troubling, faith-testing period that can last for weeks, months, years, even decades. The question is always the same: Will we remain true to God no matter what?

If we persevere, God does something remarkable. He blesses our work to an extent we never could have imagined. That was true in Mother Teresa's work, in Billy Graham's experience, in Adoniram Judson's life, and in Elijah's latter ministry years.

### **Admitting our own struggles**

It is one thing to talk about has happened or could happen to *others*.

It's quite another thing to talk *with others* when we find ourselves struggling with faith issues.

Yet talk we must—to a trusted Christian friend who will be willing to walk alongside us no matter how long it takes. Usually that trusted friend is someone who doesn't work in publishing or attend church with us.

So, what “faith wreckers” cause individuals to experientially lose their faith? And what “faith builders” help individuals re-embrace the faith in a new, stronger way? Based on a decade of research, here is what I have found.

There are nine “faith wreckers” that cause individuals to experientially lose their faith:

1. Experiencing evil and suffering
2. Living recklessly as a rugged individualist
3. Making our own rules, whatever the cost
4. Believing that anger is justified when my vision of God is clouded
5. Neglecting my time with God and failing to see him in my life
6. Studying about God without heart devotion
7. Experiencing the most crushing circumstances in life
8. Giving myself permission to do as I please—especially sexually—pushing reality (and God) out of sight
9. Being wounded in or by the church

And there are nine “faith builders” that help individuals re-embrace their faith in a new, stronger way:

1. Telling my story to a friend who knows God
2. Cultivating relationships of humility, trust and submission
3. Being courageous enough to make choices based on the truth
4. Experiencing the power of love with grace
5. Reclaiming God's promises even if I have to wait

6. Asking tough questions, wrestling with doubt and embracing hope
7. Seeing God as He is and believing that He is working behind the scenes
8. Rediscovering God's ideal and allowing him to write a vibrant new script for my life
9. Awakening to our calling as God's new prophets to the church

### **So, how are we doing?**

Like most individuals, you probably know someone who has left the church and experientially lost his or her Christian faith. Maybe it's even been your own experience. Consider the dilemma some *Cook Partners* readers might face. You may be an author, an editor, a theologian, a publisher. First, until now, you and I haven't even admitted the possibility that we could experientially lose our faith.

Second, if we take that risk seriously, we realize God is holding us to a higher standard than others.

Third, we face the additional risk of living our faith vicariously through others versus living it ourselves.

Finally, the realities within our ministry profession make it difficult to discuss our struggles. Some of our peers are competitors looking for an advantage. Others will walk away and work with someone else. Our church leadership almost certainly won't understand.

Over the past decade, many individuals have contacted me as a result of my writings, my media appearances and my speaking engagements. They have come around the world and from all walks of life (yes, including seminary professors, pastors and publishing leaders). Thanks to the Internet, they always seem to find me.

Sometimes, their first letters are caustic, even hateful. I've learned not to take it personally. Instead, I simply write back and say, "Thank you for your letter. We have a lot to talk about. Before we get into any of that, however, would you be willing to tell me your story? Sincerely, David." About a week or 10 days later, I get a second letter. Invariably, the person apologizes for his (or her) first letter, and then proceeds to tell me his story. At that point, I smile. Because almost everyone who's told me his story has ended up coming back to faith in Jesus Christ.

Thankfully, through my intensive study of Scripture, church history and contemporary experience, I have become convinced that it's not too late for someone to come back to God—whether he or she walked away from the faith or felt God was the one who left.

Believe me, as the son of an atheist—and as someone who "paid his dues" studying atheistic doctrines under a German existentialist philosopher—I know there's nowhere else to turn

[www.IfGodDisappears.blogspot.com](http://www.IfGodDisappears.blogspot.com).

The good news is, God never abandons us. Even in the worst of circumstances, He's still there, urging us to not lose hope that we will see Him again.

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