

THE **LOVE WINS** COMPANION



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A Study Guide for
Those Who Want
to Go Deeper

ROB BELL

EDITED BY DAVID VANDERVEEN



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FOREWORD

DO NOT BE AFRAID

BY JACK HEASLIP

Do you know how many times the phrase “Do not be afraid” appears in the Bible? One website says it is 365 times. I prefer to say “lots of times.”

What has fear to do with a book on love? God’s love at that? Even before *Love Wins* was released, fear was at work. People had opinions about a book they hadn’t read. I was told I needed to be skeptical, suspicious, nervous, critical, afraid, but mostly “cautious.” Caution must be good, mustn’t it? The trouble is that caution can be fear dressed up to look right and proper and maybe a shade holy.

Fear also could be heard in the questions being asked. Is it okay to question God like that? Is he destroying faith? Why doesn’t he respect our tradition, our catechism?

If you are in a group, look around and see how many people show signs of fear and suspicion. Look in a mirror for the same signs.

Jesus said, “Do not be afraid.” Angels said, “Do not be afraid.” God said it too.

After all these things, this word of God came to Abram in a vision: “Don’t be afraid, Abram. I’m your shield. Your reward will be grand.” (Gen. 15:1, MSG)

But the angel assured her, “Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you.” (Luke 1:30, MSG)

But Jesus was quick to comfort them. “Courage, it’s me. Don’t be afraid.” (Matt. 14:27, MSG)

So why shouldn’t we be afraid? Because God can be trusted.

So with a God who can be trusted we can head off into new territory or a fresh experience of old territory. We can ask questions. We do not need to be afraid.

Because we can trust God and not be afraid, we are then free to love. Love is the bottom line!

Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. (1 John 4:7, MSG)

It is like love meeting love. Our shallow attempts at loving are embraced by God’s mighty love. That, for me, is powerful stuff. With that sort of confidence we can really go for the experience and the understanding of God.

There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—

fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love. (1 John 4:18, MSG)

God is love! It's that simple, that profound.

Paul believed this. He gave the Corinthians a wonderful description of what our religion should involve and what it should look like: “For in Christ, neither our most conscientious religion nor disregard of religion amounts to anything. What matters is something far more interior: faith expressed in love” (Gal. 5:6, MSG).

Isn't that brilliant? Religion and nonreligion are firmly put in their place by God's love. And our intellects are given something to work on. Paul encourages us to think! It is okay to think! Sometimes our little gray cells are put on the back burner by those who want us to follow a faith they prescribe. It is good to unwrap a package. How can we receive the gift if we don't delve a bit?

Do not be afraid. God can be trusted. You are free to love, to explore, to ask questions, to think. That is the invitation Rob Bell puts before us in *Love Wins* and now in *The Love Wins Companion*. We are invited to step outside of the boat and draw closer to the one who calls us and wants to be known. Do not be afraid. God appreciates our efforts and smiles at our failings. He loves our humor when we lighten our load and when we enjoy the presence of his Spirit in our lives. God is willing to be found—by anyone who is looking. That's good news. And the password is *love*.



PREFACE

BY ROB BELL

I'm thrilled that you are interested in going deeper into the ideas I present in *Love Wins*. A couple of thoughts before we get going.

First, some words out there in our culture have incredibly heavy emotional attachments to them, words like *heaven, hell, judgment, salvation*. You throw these words into a conversation, and people have strong opinions and ideas whether for or against, negative or positive. This is true especially when it comes to the Christian faith, and specifically when it comes to where people are with God, who has a relationship with God, who doesn't, who's a Christian, who's not, who's going to heaven, who's going to hell.

One of the things that drives this book is my desire to simply say, "Here's what the Bible says." If some people are really, really passionate about a particular perspective, I want to know where they got that from. So when it comes to heaven and hell and judgment, what I've

tried to do in the book is lay out what the Bible actually says, what Jesus said, and then, conversely, what Jesus *didn't* say.

I believe that God loves everybody. And I believe that the heart of the Christian faith is this God who loves everybody, this Jesus who came to show us this love, give us this love, and invite us into this love. So, from my perspective, the Christian faith at its core is an experience of the love of God through this Jesus, who insists that God loves everybody, everywhere. As you read through this *Companion*, as you wrestle with the questions and go further into the ideas, as you look at this passage and that passage and that story, and as you recount your own experience or reflections, my wish is to create the space where you can meet this God and experience this God's love.

I'm fascinated when Jesus talks about how he's water. It's hard to build a systematic theology around water. Try building a denomination around water; it's very fuzzy and nebulous and ambiguous—unless, of course, you're thirsty. Then you know exactly what the water is.

Or when Jesus says he's light. Light can be hard to get your hands around; it can be hard to quantify or systematize—unless you know you're far from home, and then light shows you how to return to the place from which you came.

Jesus speaks in metaphors and parables, because ultimately he comes to bring us a living, breathing experience of the love of God right here, right now. At the heart of this book is this simple, beautiful, compelling declara-

tion that this love wins. So I hope this guide helps take you to places you haven't been before, places that are thrilling and convicting, that fill you with wonder and awe. May the peace of God be with you the whole way.

When my publisher shared with me the idea for this companion guide and asked if I could suggest who should help put it together, my first thought was my friend of twenty years Dave Vanderveen. I was of course thrilled when he said he'd do it and then continually surprised with the fresh insights and people and ideas he has brought to this project.

We have found that a lot of people are preoccupied with the question, "Is there life after death?" That's a good question, an interesting question, and one that has received a good deal of speculation and discussion. But that isn't the question that Jesus came to answer.

He came to answer a better, more urgent, more pressing question: "Is there life before death?"

And to this question Jesus repeatedly, emphatically answered, "Yes!"

That insistence of Jesus—that we can have full, overflowing, vibrant, pulsating, dynamic life right now—is what *Love Wins* is about and it's what this companion guide is about.

What's possible right now?

What is God doing in the world right here in our midst?

What does the resurrection life Jesus gives us look like at this moment in time?

My hope is that as you discuss *Love Wins* you will find yourself returning to that question and that insistence over and over and over again. My prayer is that you are not sidetracked for any significant amount of time with questions that we cannot answer, because we are speculating about things that haven't happened. My desire is that the book and now this companion will produce a profound sense of urgency and immediacy that there really is bread for the hungry and water for the thirsty and light for those who need to find their way home.

So here's to the discussion.

Enjoy.

And now, a word from Dave.

HOW TO USE THIS COMPANION

BY DAVID VANDERVEEN

Some of the Pharisees said, “Obviously, this man can’t be from God. He doesn’t keep the Sabbath.” . . .

The man replied, “This is amazing! You claim to know nothing about him, but the fact is, he opened my eyes! It’s well known that God isn’t at the beck and call of sinners, but listens carefully to anyone who lives in reverence and does his will. That someone opened the eyes of a man born blind has never been heard of—ever. If this man didn’t come from God, he wouldn’t be able to do anything.” . . .

Jesus then said, “I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have

never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind.”
(John 9:16, 30–33, 39, MSG)

When the blind are being healed, arguments about keeping the Sabbath seem absurd. They miss the point entirely. Jesus’s words are clear about those who cannot see the light, who refuse to look away from their own interests and their own doctrines when the good news shows itself in surprising ways among us.

We all wear filters, lenses, and, in some cases, blinders when we read the Bible. No one experiences the gospel message in a vacuum. When a book appears that generates dramatic and enthusiastic interest about the underlying truth of the good news of Jesus, it demands our attention. We need to make sure we are not like those pretending to see, but are actually blind. Being open to investigating and exploring what is before us helps prevent blindness.

The problem many of us face is how to really listen—particularly as we become more comfortable with the patterns and boundaries through which we interpret the world around us. Are we truly open to God’s surprises? Will we let God confront us in gut-wrenching ways with his good news? Will we let God break through our own ideas about who God is and to speak to us in fresh ways?

The most important thing for reading *Love Wins* and *The Love Wins Companion* isn’t discovering the “right” beliefs about Christianity or salvation. The important thing is seriously to engage the material in the books,

really attempt to read them without running the ideas through the blinders you may have, before trying to discern what the Holy Spirit may be saying through these words. Those blinders might have come from a specific Christian tradition or from another faith or no faith, whether you call yourself a believer, agnostic, atheist, or just someone looking for ideas. Dive into *Love Wins* and look around. Engage the ideas and voices in *The Love Wins Companion*. They are for those who wish to see.

We recognize that people will have different purposes for reading this companion to *Love Wins*. Some will want to explore more deeply the ideas in *Love Wins* as individuals; some will want to do the same in a small group or even in a class. We have tried to make this as open-ended and flexible as possible for all these uses. Each chapter from the original book has a corresponding section in this companion that includes an overview and introduction by Rob Bell; a general introduction of the new material by me; Bible studies and exercises for study; discussion questions for groups; and, finally, related “readings” of articles, blogs, book excerpts, and interviews to explore more deeply the ideas from the original chapter.

To get the most out of this companion, we recommend following these principles to avoid “blindness” or unnecessary division:

1. *Don't be overly focused on ending up with the right answer.* This worry often hinders our ability to hear the real question and wrestle with the issues. Relax, drop your preconceived objections, and try to re-

spond directly just to the text in front of you. The goal of both books is for you to understand what the Bible actually teaches. In the end, you might not agree with everything these books say, but we want to make sure you truly hear the questions and ideas first in case God has something new to say to you.

2. *Focus on loving the people you are discussing these issues with*—regardless of their opinion or yours. This is the explicit teaching of scripture. “No matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love” (1 Cor. 13:3, MSG).
3. *Recognize that we all read the Bible through a lens and not in a vacuum.* No one “just reads the Bible.” The church has been wrestling with these texts for two thousand years. There are dozens of major traditions and hundreds of minor ones that all read the biblical texts in certain ways. We are not saying the Bible is unclear or impossible to understand. But we are saying that you have filters that shape how you are reading the Bible. If you haven’t identified your lenses and filters, take some time to understand your own background, biases, and the history of the ideas that have shaped your own thought.
4. *Make sure you distinguish ideas from the people who are expressing those ideas* (including your own). Candid and strong discussion is powerful and beneficial when we don’t attack the people we are talking with. Debate the worthiness of the idea without infringing on the worth of the person.

5. *Make peace with the reality that good Christians can disagree on important matters.* This is another reason why it is important to separate critical comments about ideas from critical comments about people. Very bright and very devout people have a vast range of orthodox opinions that don't always align.
6. *Study the history of the idea you are defending.* Many people are shocked to discover that what they thought was ancient Christian orthodoxy turns out to be a relatively recent development in the church or, conversely, what they considered a problem doctrine has been a standard orthodox view for centuries. That is why it is helpful to ask: How old is the idea in the history of the Christian tradition? Where did it originate? What was it responding to? What were the original arguments disputing it? Understanding these contextual issues allows us to appreciate both the limits of an idea and how adaptive doctrines have been to the issues and context of the church throughout the centuries.

Jesus specialized in taking religious people's understandings about God and how everything works and then turning them on their heads. He wanted people to see that God was doing something new. In that vein, *Love Wins* stretches many of our preconceived ideas about Christianity for those both inside and outside the faith. Rob does this mostly by getting us to pay attention to

what Jesus and his followers *actually* said. Embracing the biblical text with as much separation from our preexisting ideas and experiences as possible may offer some surprises about Jesus's good news. Perhaps God is offering a bigger love than many of us have ever imagined.

THE **LOVE WINS** COMPANION



CHAPTER ONE

WHAT ABOUT THE FLAT TIRE?

Overview by Rob Bell

Over the years I have met many people who are fascinated, compelled, or drawn to Jesus, but some reason or obstacle keeps them away. They may have heard from a Christian, “This is how it is, period, end of discussion. The Bible says it, so that settles it.” Or they might have been taught that to follow Jesus, they had to go down a certain road and believe certain things, some of which they found problematic. What I’m interested in in this chapter is the power of questioning and the experience of solidarity in finding you’re not alone—of always wondering, “But what about that?” and then finding out, “Oh, other people feel the same way.”

My interest here is that you get loosened up with the questions, that the questions pull out of you, “You’re right. That doesn’t make sense” or “You’re right. I’ve always had

a problem with that explanation.” It’s okay. There should be no fear in the questioning and no hesitation in the asking. We can go there—that’s the power.

And the biblical tradition is actually filled with questions, all the way to Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Questions are actually one of the ways we meet the divine. My hope is that somewhere in here you find your own questions and you learn that you aren’t alone.

Going Deeper by David Vanderveen

Many readers of chapter 1 of *Love Wins* are a little taken back by all the questions Rob throws at them about what it means to be “saved.” Rob is not trying to deny or criticize what Christians believe, but to reveal that our present understanding does not explain everything. Some churches suggest there is a specific process for getting “saved.” In this chapter, Rob explores a wide range of those techniques, some of which conflict, as well as a long list of ways that Jesus told people they were accepted. Our beliefs about God, Jesus, and the meaning of Jesus’s death and resurrection need to deepen in order for us to grasp more fully what the Bible means by “saved.”

Rob is not the first to raise these issues. In a 1997 interview of evangelist Billy Graham by televangelist Robert Schuller of the “Hour of Power,”* the conversation was

* Find the interview online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNCnxA91fHE>.

surprisingly broader than some Christians imagined it should be:

Schuller: Tell me, what do you think is the future of Christianity?

Graham: . . . I think everybody that loves Christ, or knows Christ, whether they're conscious of it or not, they're members of the Body of Christ. And I don't think that we're going to see a great sweeping revival that will turn the whole world to Christ at any time. I think James answered that, the Apostle James in the first council in Jerusalem, when he said that God's purpose for this age is to call out a people for His name. And that's what God is doing today. He's calling people out of the world for His name, whether they come from the Muslim world or the Buddhist world or the Christian world or the nonbelieving world, they are members of the Body of Christ, because they've been called by God. They may not even know the name of Jesus, but they know in their hearts that they need something that they don't have, and they turn to the only light that they have, and I think that they are saved, and that they're going to be with us in heaven.

Schuller: What I hear you saying is that it's possible for Jesus Christ to come into human hearts and souls and lives, even if they've been born in darkness and have never had exposure to the Bible. Is that a correct interpretation of what you're saying?

Graham: Yes, it is, because I believe that. I've met people in various parts of the world in tribal situations who have never seen a Bible or heard about a Bible and never heard of Jesus, but they've believed in their hearts that there was a God, and they've tried to live a life that was quite apart from the surrounding community in which they lived.

Schuller: I'm so thrilled to hear you say this. There's a wideness in God's mercy.

Graham: There is. There definitely is.

We should not be surprised that one of the greatest evangelists in the history of the church thought along these lines. As someone who had spent a career presenting the gospel to non-Christians, Graham had to think deeply and thoroughly about the logic of God's salvation. So should we.

We have included an excerpt from Oswald Chambers's *My Utmost for His Highest* as another example and model of a past Christian teacher who offers counsel. In "The Temptation of Religious Success," Chambers describes the danger of religious conformity and taking pride in Christian success. Instead, he advises that we try to seek only the Lord's approval. This is good, but tough advice.

People have very personal stories about how they came to accept Jesus or why they've rejected him. The questions, Bible studies, exercises, and readings in this chapter are designed to dig into the various claims different Christian groups make about what salvation is and the

variety of ways to accomplish it, allowing you to explore more fully what you think the Bible teaches on this core issue. Before the group exercise and discussion questions, we have included a Bible study showcasing just how much the Bible embraces and models the practice of asking questions; this is followed by David Dark's reflections on the theme of his book, *The Sacredness of Questioning Everything*, which we excerpt.

Bible Study: A God Who Loves Questions

Many people are afraid to question their faith, having been taught that this is tantamount to either rejecting or losing one's faith. The best evidence against this line of thought is the Bible itself, in which both God and all the main characters ask many, many troubling questions. Asking questions is, in fact, a means God often uses to help us rid ourselves of limited and wrongheaded notions about God, so that we catch a larger and expanded vision of who we worship, which this survey of the Bible's use of questions reveals:

God [to Adam and Eve]: Where are you? . . . Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from? (Gen. 3:9-11)

Cain: Am I my brother's keeper? (Gen. 4:9)

God: What have you done? (Gen. 4:10)

Abraham: Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety? (Gen. 17:17)

God: Why did Sarah laugh and say, “Will I really have a child, now that I am old?” Is anything too hard for the LORD? (Gen. 18:13-14)

Moses: Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is his name?” Then what shall I tell them? (Exod. 3:13)

Job: Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment? Why must those who know him look in vain for such days? (Job 24:1)

God: Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Prepare to defend yourself; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? (Job 38:2-5)

Jeremiah: How long will the land lie parched and the grass in every field be withered? Because those who live in it are wicked, the animals and birds have perished. Moreover, the people are saying, “He will not see what happens to us.”

God: If you have raced with people on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If

you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan? (Jer. 12:4-5)

Habakkuk: How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? (Hab. 1:2-3)

Expert in the law: Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Jesus: What is written in the Law? How do you read it? (Luke 10:25-26)

Jesus: Who do people say I am?

Disciples: Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.

Jesus: But what about you? Who do you say I am? (Mark 8:27-29)

Jesus [to the Twelve]: You do not want to leave too, do you?

Peter: Lord, to whom shall we go? (John 6:67-68)

Jesus: You of little faith, why are you so afraid? [Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.]

Disciples: What kind of man is this? (Matt. 8:26-27)

Jesus [on the cross]: *Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?* (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). (Matt. 27:46)

Jesus: Simon son of John, do you love me more than these [fish]?

Peter: Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

Jesus: Feed my lambs. . . . Simon son of John, do you love me?

Peter: Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

Jesus: Take care of my sheep. . . . Simon son of John, do you love me?

Peter: Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.

Jesus: Feed my sheep. (John 21:15-17)

Jesus: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Saul/Paul: Who are you, Lord? (Acts 9:4-5)

Paul: Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by human effort? Have you experienced so much in vain? (Gal. 3:3-4)

James: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? (James 2:5-7)

John the letter writer: If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? (1 John 3:17)

Group Exercise: Knowing Your Story

Before engaging in the discussion questions below, take time to reflect on your own experiences and beliefs about conversion and salvation. How have you understood the role of conversion and salvation in your life? In the lives of others you know? What has been attractive about the idea of being “saved”? What has raised questions for you? What has seemed false? Spend time before the meeting writing down your own story about why you have embraced or rejected Jesus. Diagram or describe how you believe people get “saved” and what that means.

At the meeting, split up in groups of two or three and take the time to share each other’s stories about being saved. After each person’s story, the others in the group should provide feedback and reactions.

After everyone has shared their story, ask each other: How are our stories similar? How are they different? How did hearing others’ stories shape or change how you think about what God’s love and salvation might be about?

Discussion Questions

1. Before reading this book, how did you think of heaven and hell?
2. Do you believe God invites us, or even welcomes us, to discuss and debate the big questions of faith, doctrine, and the Bible?
3. Do you think Christians can know who does and who does not go to hell?

4. What messages have you heard about who goes (or how many go) to heaven? Or about how God can be both loving Father and Judge?
5. What percentage of people who have ever lived do you estimate will end up in hell? Do you think Gandhi is in hell?
6. What do you think non-Christians would say about the church's views on who goes and who does not go to heaven?
7. How do you respond to the problem Rob raises of explaining how a *finite* life of sin could entail *eternal* torment?
8. Do you believe there is no hope for atheists who die? Why or why not?
9. What role does our reason play in our salvation? What about people who are mentally handicapped, for example? How are they saved?
10. How important is the question, "Do you know where you will go after you die?" to your understanding of the Christian faith? Is "going somewhere else" (either heaven or hell) the message of Christianity?
11. Does our salvation depend on someone else sharing the good news of the gospel with us? Does others' salvation depend on our doing the same for them?
12. Of the questions Rob raises in this chapter, which did you experience as pertaining to issues you have had before or issues you would like to discuss more?

READING
QUESTIONING GOD
BY DAVID DARK

*Do we really love God, or do we say we love God because we fear we will be damned otherwise? This nagging question, although primitive, nevertheless works its way into the souls of many Christians. Some respond by never letting questions arise; others deal with the questions by rejecting the faith. But what if God is actually the one behind the questions? What if God wants us to ask these questions? What if God actually loves questions? Such was the discovery of author and teacher David Dark, who writes about exactly these matters in his book *The Sacredness of Questioning Everything* (Zondervan).*

Picture a tiny town with a tight-knit community. The people share joys and concerns, woes and gossip. They keep a close and often affectionate watch on one another's business. They talk and talk and talk.

What an outsider would notice within minutes of listening in on conversations are constant and slightly self-conscious references to "Uncle Ben." A beautiful sunset prompts a townsperson to say, "Isn't Uncle Ben awesome?" Good news brings out how thankful and overjoyed they feel toward Uncle Ben. Even in tragedy, a local might say, in a slightly nervous fashion, "You know, it just goes to show how much we all need Uncle Ben. I know—we all know—that Uncle Ben is good."

Uncle Ben is always on their minds.

Even when the magnificence of Uncle Ben isn't spoken of aloud, he's somehow present in facial expressions and actions. It's the look of stopping a train of thought before it goes too far, of letting an uncompleted sentence trail off into awkward silence, of swiftly hanging the subject. It's as if a conversation can only go so far. People hardly ever look one another in the eye for long.

At the beginning of each week there's a meeting in the largest house in town. Upon arriving, people get caught up in good fellowship and animated discussion of the week's events, with conversations straining in the direction of Uncle Ben. When a bell sounds, talk ceases. Everyone moves to the staircase and descends into the basement. Each person sits facing an enormous, rumbling furnace. Seated close to the furnace door, as if he were a part of the furnace itself, is a giant man in black overalls. His back is turned to them.

They wait in silence. In time the man turns around. His face is angry, contorted. He fixes a threatening stare of barely contained rage on each person, then roars, "Am I good?"

To which they respond in unison, "Yes, Uncle Ben, you are good."

"Am I worthy of praise?"

"You alone are worthy of our praise."

"Do you love me more than anything? More than anyone?"

"We love you and you alone, Uncle Ben."

“You better love me, or I’m going to put you . . . in here”—he opens the furnace door to reveal a gasping darkness—“forever.”

Out of the darkness can be heard sounds of anguish and lament. Then he closes the furnace door and turns his back to them. They sit in silence.

Finally, feeling reasonably assured that Uncle Ben has finished saying what he has to say, they leave. They live their lives as best they can. They try to think and speak truthfully and do well by one another. They resume their talk of the wonders of Uncle Ben’s love in anticipation of the next week’s meeting.

But they’re limited, in myriad ways, by fear. Fear causes them to censor their own thoughts and words. Fear prevents them from telling anyone of their inner anguish and fright. Fear keeps them from recognizing in one another’s eyes their common desperation. This fear is interwoven, subtly and sometimes not so subtly, in all of their relationships.

End of story.

I find this story both jarring and entirely familiar. It captures some of my worst fears concerning the character of God. And I suspect a good number of people live their lives haunted by a nightmare similar to this one. Perhaps you entertain fears like these. Perhaps Uncle Ben forms your image of the divine even now.

Something akin to the Uncle Ben image might be what a lot of people refer to when they speak of religion as the worst thing that ever happened to them, a nightmare that damages everything it touches. We might pro-

test that there's much more to religion than such tales of terror. But I find it hard to deny that the image of Uncle Ben lurks within an awful lot of what is called popular religious belief.

Uncle Ben might be the bestselling version of an all-powerful deity, a great and powerful Wizard of Oz type who refuses to be questioned and threatens anyone who dares to doubt or protest. Fear constrains many to call this God good and loving, ignoring what they feel inwardly. The less reverent candidly observe that this God is the perfect model for a brutal dictator, the cosmic crime boss who runs everything and expects us to be grateful. Trying to satisfy such a God while also getting through a workday, trying to balance a checkbook, and being moderately attentive to the needs of others can take a certain emotional toll.

Loving God

For a long time, I was in the habit of praying a prayer (“I love you, Lord”) that was something of a gamble, like Pascal's wager. I wasn't sure I loved this God at all. In fact, I believed this Uncle Ben-like God was unlovable, determined to consign most of humanity to eternal torment for believing the wrong things. But, given the terrifying outcome of not loving him, it seemed sensible to say I loved and believed in him anyway. If, somehow, I succeeded in loving this God, lucky me. And if I didn't love him, I'd be more or less damned anyway.

Having faith in this brand of God is akin to Orwell's "double-think"—a disturbing mind trick by which we don't let ourselves know what's really going on in our minds for fear of what might follow. We learn to deny what we think and feel. The resulting mind-set is one of all fear all the time, a fear that can render us incapable of putting two and two together. Never quite free to say what we see.

When we think of belief intertwined with such fear, we might begin to wonder if self-professed believers caught in the grip of unseemly ideologies, religious or otherwise, are as fully convinced of what they claim to believe as they appear. Many are trying to prove their ultimate commitment by eliminating doubt—and fear—ridging themselves of the last vestiges of independent thought through force of will. Responding to the push that demands as much can become a kind of survival instinct. We do it without thinking about it. We witness the loss of independent thinking in a wide variety of settings—in offices, training camps, schools, political parties, clubs, families, and other religious assemblies. We're instructed to believe and to silence our questions and our imaginations. Like Orwell's Big Brother, Uncle Ben thrives when questioning is out of the question.

Open-ended questions such as "What on earth are we doing here?" and "Are we going crazy?" might occasionally give us enough air to keep breathing, but we're very often suffocating. We have just enough religion to be afraid as we go through our days, as we wake up and fall asleep. We feel pressure to believe—or pretend to

believe—that God is love, while suspecting with a sinking feeling that God likes almost no one.

William Blake captured this hateful spirit most effectively by naming him Nobodaddy (nobody’s daddy, non-father, Father of Jealousy). As a being of hatefulness and perpetual accusation, Uncle Ben might be called a Satanic perversion of the idea of God. However we choose to name him, his voice (or its voice) is at work within our world.

For the record, I don’t believe in the nonloving, fear-producing image that is Uncle Ben, but I hasten to add that I’m not without my own doubts. The intensity of the struggle ebbs and flows. When people ask, “Are you sure God isn’t like Uncle Ben?” I tend to reply, “Most of the time.”

Deliverance Begins with Questions

I readily confess that, in my darkest hours, the fear of an Uncle Ben, Nobodaddy-driven universe still has a hold on me, even as I hope and pray that my children and their children will find such an unworthy image of God to be almost comical. In my own religious upbringing, nobody ever told me that the Creator of the universe was a hellish handler of human beings. But as a child, I had a way of filling in the blanks with my imagination. Images sprang out of what I was told must be in the Bible somewhere. And some very dark ideas arose when talk of baptism and the age of accountability and assurance of salvation came up. I suppose such prospects motivated me, at least partially,

to share my faith with other people. But would I really be doing others a favor if I managed to convince them of my own little nightmare? What should one do with a Nobodaddy on the brain? Is deliverance possible?

I believe deliverance begins with questions. It begins with people who love questions, people who live with questions and by questions, people who feel a deep joy when good questions are asked. When we meet these people—some living, some through history, art, and literature—things begin to change. Something is let loose. When we're exposed to the liveliness of holding everything up to the light of good questions—what I call “sacred questioning”—we discover that redemption is creeping into the way we think, believe, and see the world. This re-deeming (re-valuing) of what we've made of our lives, a redemption that perhaps begins with the insertion of a question mark beside whatever feels final and absolute and beyond questioning, gives our souls a bit of elbow room, a space in which to breathe and imagine again, as if for the first time.

I had specific convictions concerning God and sin and eternity, but I also understood that my concepts, however well I might articulate them, were flawed, broken and always in need of rehabilitation. When I heard Leonard Cohen proclaim in his song “Anthem” that there are cracks in absolutely everything, I sensed he was describing my life. The cracks, Cohen croons, as if we should all know it by now, are how the light shines in, and it is only by remaining aware of our imperfections that we remain open to redemption and reform. When we have ques-

tions, illumination is possible. Otherwise we're closed and no light can enter.

My inner Nobodaddy remained. Something clicked when a woman in Northern Ireland told me her own Uncle Ben story. She said she'd heard it from the Jesuit priest Gerard Hughes.* Until I heard her story, I didn't have a good way of talking about this binding, bad concept of God. I might even say that I didn't know this death-dealing negative image was there. I didn't know what had hold of me. The story, as stories will, prompted a lot of questions concerning the presumed goodness of God, the idea that God is love, and what it might mean to affirm, as I do, that God conquers rather than sponsors death.

The light began to shine through the cracks. Stories, I find, help the light to shine.

Sacred Questioning

There was a time in my life when I viewed the Uncle Ben story, despite its nightmarish quality, as an accurate depiction of the way things work. Protesting it would have seemed cosmically useless, given that this God doesn't suffer questions, doubts, or complaints. But I eventually came to suspect that any god who is nervous, defensive,

* Gerard Hughes speaks of "an identikit picture of God," which formed in his mind during his conversations with university students in his years as a chaplain. It became the story of "good old Uncle George." "Good old Uncle George" can be found in the first chapter of Hughes's book *Oh God, Why? A Spiritual Journey Towards Meaning, Wisdom, and Strength* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire, UK: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2000), http://www.gerardwhughes.com/oh_god_why_chapter1.htm (accessed August 21, 2008).

or angry in the face of questions is a false god. I began to realize that I often ascribed to God the traits of people who are ill at ease, anxious, and occasionally hateful and who even presume from time to time to speak on God's behalf. I began to wonder if the Bible backs up the contemptuousness they carry around.

Over time, the Bible ceased to be a catalog of all the things one has to believe (or pretend to believe) in order to not go to hell. Instead, the Bible became a broad, multifaceted collection of people crying out to God—a collection of close encounters with the God who is present, somehow, in those very cries. Far from being an anthology of greeting-card material, those accounts of joy, anger, lamentation, and hope are all bound upon the most formidable array of social criticism ever assembled in one volume.

And Christianity, far from being a tradition in which doubts and questions are suppressed in favor of uncritical, blind faith, began to assume the form of a robust culture in which anything can be asked and everything can be said. The call to worship is a call to complete candor and radical questioning—questioning the way things are, the way we are, and the way things ought to be. As G. K. Chesterton observed, the New Testament portrays a God who, by being wholly present in the dying cry of Jesus of Nazareth, even doubted and questioned himself. The summons to sacred questioning—like the call to honesty, like the call to prayer—is a call to be true and to let the chips fall where they may. This call to worship is deeper than the call to sign off on a checklist of particular tenets or beliefs. It is also more difficult.

READING
THE TEMPTATION OF RELIGIOUS SUCCESS

BY OSWALD CHAMBERS

It is good to be reminded we are not the first to be tempted by snags and dead ends in the Christian life. The church has had two millennia of practice. Here writer and preacher Oswald Chambers (1874–1917) provides a meditation on how we are tempted as Christians to measure ourselves by “successful service” or tempted to conform ourselves to “the pattern and print of the religious age we live in.” Taken from his classic work My Utmost for His Highest, his caution is timely as we think through what the real message of Jesus is and what constitutes ill-fitting tradition. His advice is also wise as well as relevant: focus solely to be approved by God, and work (and debate) with kindness and gentleness, without coercion. Amen.

Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you. (Luke 10:20)

As Christian workers, worldliness is not our snare, sin is not our snare, but spiritual wantoning is, viz.: taking the pattern and print of the religious age we live in, making eyes at spiritual success. Never court anything other than the approval of God, go “without the camp, bearing His reproach.” Jesus told the disciples not to rejoice in successful service, and yet this seems to be the one thing in which most of us do rejoice. We have the commercial view—so many souls saved and sanctified,

thank God, now it is all right. Our work begins where God's grace has laid the foundation; we are not to save souls, but to disciple them. Salvation and sanctification are the work of God's sovereign grace; our work as His disciples is to disciple lives until they are wholly yielded to God. One life wholly devoted to God is of more value to God than one hundred lives simply awakened by His Spirit. As workers for God we must reproduce our own kind spiritually, and that will be God's witness to us as workers. God brings us to a standard of life by His grace, and we are responsible for reproducing that standard in others.

Unless the worker lives a life hidden with Christ in God, he is apt to become an irritating dictator instead of an indwelling disciple. Many of us are dictators, we dictate to people and to meetings. Jesus never dictates to us in that way. Whenever Our Lord talked about discipleship, He always prefaced it with an "IF," never with an emphatic assertion—"You must." Discipleship carries an option with it.