

Lord, I Don't Want to Be a Christian: A Journey to Jesus

Chapter 1: Lord, I Don't Want to Be a Christian

By Adria Connell

The Bible has a way of softening hearts of stone; I know this because one of those hearts was mine. Like many Southerners, I grew up going to church every Sunday because that is what good Southerners do. When I was 11 years old, I walked toward Christ when I was baptized and confirmed in the United Methodist Church. But as a teenager, I walked away from God and became an atheist because Christianity had nothing for me, so I told myself. What made me a skeptic? It is difficult even now to pinpoint a single reason, but the quick explanation is simply that my understanding of Christianity was deeply flawed. I hadn't read much of the Bible, and what I had gleaned from authority figures in my youth was that Christianity was a system of rules and that if we didn't follow them, we were going to Hell. I didn't want to be a Christian because I knew I could never be perfect and perfection seemed to be what God wanted most. If I had read the Bible, I would've understood that perfection is not a requirement for God to love us. If we were perfect, we wouldn't need Christ or the sacrifice He made for us. We need to be taught or reminded of God's infinite love and grace for us despite—and especially because of—our imperfections.

So, what happened? How did I change from a skeptic who didn't accept Scripture to a believer in Christ?

In March 1998, my life was filled with strife, and I was extremely depressed. My boyfriend had broken up with me. I was losing my friends and my credibility, and I didn't know how to stop the carnage. I tried to get jobs in a different town and would get offers only to have them rescinded. I could not catch a break. Everything in my life was falling apart. The last straw was when my car was totaled in an accident, my second wreck in just two weeks. I suffered only from a bruised chest, but the accident still shook me up, especially when the salvage guy showed me my car. He explained that the impact had pushed the front of the car so far toward me that another inch could have caused the damaged metal to cut into my leg. I remember my mother's words coming to me at that moment, "You are always in my prayers." It seemed to me even then that God saved me because of those prayers.

I finally asked God, "What do You want me to do? I know You exist, but I don't want to be a Christian. I'm not good enough." At the end of my rope, I prayed: "I want to know the truth even if I don't like it, even if it's not what I want to hear. But if being a Christian is what You want me to be, then I'll be a Christian. Just please show me what You want me to do."

I asked God to give me a sign or a message, opened my Bible, and my eyes fell on Luke 22:42. Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying to His Father in anguish, His sweat like drops of blood as He faced arrest and crucifixion. What opened my eyes was His prayer: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (NIV). Jesus asked for the cup to be taken from Him, yet surrendered to His Father's will. My tears turned to laughter because His anguish and surrender spoke directly to the prayer I had just made. I understood that faith was not about making myself perfect; it was about trusting God even when I was afraid. The words of Psalm 23:4 and Psalm 27:1 took on new meaning for me: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," and "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" (ESV).

After I had this epiphany, I felt as if a great weight had been lifted off of me, as if weighty shackles placed around my neck had fallen away. A feeling of warmth poured onto my

head like warm oil. I didn't understand these sensations until I read the Bible in greater depth and heard different evangelists describe similar experiences, but I came to understand that what I experienced was a baptism of the Holy Spirit. It was the first major turning point of my life.

I walked back to Jesus, as I promised God, at 28 years of age, and I have never looked back. That's not to say that all my problems were solved or that I didn't go through any more tough times. I was still not spiritually mature and I still had a lot of growing up to do. It's just that trials became easier to bear because I felt God's presence in my life. Whatever I'm going through has a reason behind it, even if it's just to make me stronger or to make me value more what I have. Trials remind me not to take what I have for granted or to take Him for granted, as we often do.

I suppose one can argue that I read into my experience what I wanted to, or that I imagined the whole thing. I don't believe that I imagined it because I certainly did not want to be a Christian. It was just that, more than not wanting to be a Christian, I wanted the truth. I wanted the truth even if it turned out that I would have to believe in order to find it rather than "see" it. I reached a point where I was open to receiving the truth regardless of what the answer might be, even if I did not like it, and that, my friends, made all the difference.

You could be reading this because you're not a Christian but you're at the end of your rope and have nowhere else to go. Or perhaps you are a Christian and you're baffled that a book with this title is sitting in your favorite section of the bookstore. Or, whether you're a Christian or not, maybe you're simply looking for answers. You may feel as though there should be more to the life you have. You seek purpose and understanding and have looked in many places, but peace still eludes you.

Contentment, happiness, peace, and joy can seem elusive and temporary. And if you are a Christian, you're supposed to have those things, right? So why don't you have them? Did you do something wrong? Are you living wrong? Are you being punished? Are you unworthy?

Let's begin with those questions. John 10:10 records a core teaching of Jesus Christ: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (NIV). Jesus died not for a religion, but for us. And He did not come merely so that we could exist. He came so that we could have life to the full.

That does not mean Christians are promised lives without grief, disappointment, fear, or loss. My own life after returning to Christ certainly did not become painless. What changed was that suffering no longer meant I was alone or abandoned. The faith I had once rejected gave me a way to walk through hardship without believing that hardship was the whole story.

For years, I thought Christianity was chiefly about meeting an impossible standard and avoiding punishment when I failed. What I began to discover instead was grace: not permission to remain unchanged, but the assurance that I did not have to make myself worthy before coming to Christ. I had spent years believing I was not good enough to be a Christian. The truth was that my inability to make myself perfect was not a reason to stay away from Jesus. It was one of the reasons I needed Him.

That is why this story is not only about how I became a Christian. It is about the questions that remained after I did. What does an abundant life actually look like when life is still difficult? What does it mean to trust God when we are frightened, disappointed, or unsure of what He is doing? How do believers receive the peace and joy Scripture promises without pretending that pain is not real? Those are not questions I left behind when I returned to Christ. They became the questions I was finally willing to ask Him.

I know I am not the only person who has asked them. We need to feel loved, to feel that we belong, to feel that we matter, and to know that our lives have purpose and meaning. I spent years looking for those things while resisting the One I eventually came to believe was their source. I didn't want to be a Christian. More than that, though, I wanted the truth. Once I became willing to receive the truth even if it was not the answer I wanted, I found myself walking back toward the God I had spent years walking away from.