

## You Would Be There

By Justin J. Agoglia  
Commack, NY Starbucks  
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As a person whose faith is central to everything I do, I've thought much about my future, including my existence after I die. Having hope for a better afterlife is fundamental to my spiritual heritage and not just a wishful prayer. I personally believe it's a reality even though my belief is still a matter of faith. If Christ hadn't returned to earth after his gruesome death, there wouldn't be an ounce of hope for me or others. And his return, as witnessed and documented by his disciples and other well-known historians, not only confirms his resurrection, but it foreshadows *our hope* that we will one day be with him in eternity.

It breaks my heart when I hear someone share that they hope they'll be included in God's promise of eternal life. Not too long ago, I stood in the presence of someone battling a terminal illness and she openly confessed that she prays she'll get into heaven when she passes. As I gently probed her to find the genesis of her skepticism, I quickly ascertained that her wish was based on her experience, and not scripture. In other words, her hope rested on how well she lived her earthly life. (I should add that she embraces the Catholic tradition so this wasn't a foreign concept to her theology).

If salvation was based on our works, it only leaves us with more questions, not certainties. For example, when do we know that we've completed enough good deeds? What is the standard of measurement? Obviously, not everyone will do the same amount of works as their fellow neighbor. So, how can we know for sure when *we've* crossed that threshold of God's approval? As you can see, this is why many wonderful individuals are left only with a wishful prayer.

Do you realize that the one thing that differentiates Christianity from all other religious faiths is that salvation is based solely on faith in Jesus Christ, not our charitable works or even our sins. You heard me correctly. All other faiths rest their hope in praiseworthy deeds or good virtues as a basis for a better afterlife. Some of you who embrace the Christian faith know this truth, yet you still live life hoping you'll be good enough for God's acceptance. I realize this concept of God's approval is difficult for most to accept as plausible. I must confess it hasn't always been easy for me to embrace either. Part of this stems from a wrong interpretation of scripture, but I feel there is a stronger argument for why we adopt this faulty view of God and his unconditional love for us.

A large part has to do with what has been modeled to us, starting with our parents, other human relationships, even our experiences with the Church. As much as I would like to think that there are some who truly love unconditionally, it's not a reality. No one has mastered love as purists like to argue. Only God can love to that degree of perfection. Perhaps the closest model of unconditional love is a parent's love for his/her children. However, at some point even that love will get tested. When's the last time your child has tested your patience? What were you feeling then? Overwhelming love and adoration? I'm sure you felt something else.

Let's go one step further. What about marital relationships - where both partners commit to love one another for a lifetime? As much as I would like to believe that maturity, experience, and a meaningful relationship helps us love more purely, our love as adults is still conditioned based. Of course, we can grow to love our significant others better and we should commit to working on such relationships. But the fact remains that every relationship is based on certain parameters, meaning, if you love me, then I will love you. The same also holds true that if you hurt me, I will have certain negative feelings towards you. I've never met someone who really liked being hurt.

If I unconditional love had a voice, it would say, “I love you even when you don’t love me or show me love in return. In fact, I love you even when you hurt me.” This type of love is unending. It’s constant. It seeks to do what is best for the other individual first. And when one person offends the other, the offended never withholds or withdraws his/her love. This is the kind of love God has for us and I’m sure it breaks his heart that we really don’t get it.

God’s love is really that pure. Scripture points us to many examples of this extraordinary love He has for us. We see this evident with the prodigal son story. It’s upon his son’s return, that while he was still in the distance, his father (who represents God) runs toward his son - a behavior considered shameful for any Jewish patriarch. And then without any request for an explanation regarding his selfish behaviors, the father chooses to celebrate his son’s return with a feast and showers him with the finest of gifts. This seems like an awkward response for someone who turned his back on his family and squandered his father’s inheritance. Some professionals might even question the father’s state of mind. But I already pointed out that the father didn’t care what others thought of him; all that mattered was that his son was home. If that’s not amazing love, I’m not sure what else could top that. With the parable of the lost coin, we notice the tenacious spirit of a woman searching for her treasured coin. She carefully lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches until it is found. And when it’s found, she calls her neighbors and friends and tells them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!”<sup>1</sup>

It’s passages such as these which give us a glimpse as to this kind of unconditional love God has for you and I but, at the same time, it is such passages which also make God so hard to understand. Many of us don’t see God as a loving and kind being. We

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 15:9 NJKV

see him as an austere person who is far removed from our lives. And if he does choose to participate in human history, he looks around to strike revenge on the “sinner.” So, we basically fear him as a child fears the wrath of an abusive father.

The sieve through which we learned about love has unfortunately been tainted by our own experiences of how we received and gave love. For some reason, God distinctively chose to use human relationships as the context by which you and I would learn to understand this wonderful, yet mishandled gift. He knew it was an imperfect model, yet he wanted us to learn about love since it’s the very essence of who he is. If we can’t love one another in the flesh, then how can we learn to love a God that is invisible? It’s certainly a challenge. Even when our love for one another is genuine, it is also weathered by hurts, broken promises, wrongful actions, unkind words, and other regrettable behaviors. For that reason, trying to see God as a loving and caring God, especially when we see our loved ones suffering, is never an easy thing to accept. Watching the birth of a baby is perhaps the greatest demonstration of love in action. I’ve been told that such an experience causes most parents to be filled with awe and gratitude for God, and that he would allow them to partake in such a miracle of creation. Then again, it is when we see and experience the worst things in life which make most of us question his goodness in our lives.

Since my father died, my faith in a loving God was rocked hard. My ship of faith was turned on its side and that once familiar trip of life I was on took a very different course. Even up to this writing, there has been what I call a deafening silence to my plea for guidance (from God) as my family and I make our way through this wretched experience. We’ve had our share of rock-bottom days. You’ve heard the expression, “when it rains, it pours.” It’s true. Not only did we lose our father, but we lost many other things along the way (and I’m not referring to tangible possessions). To make

matters worse, the minute we thought we were getting back on our feet, something else reared its ugly head to knock us down again. I've gone to God many times, openly expressing my frustration and questioning his reasoning. Nothing seems to make sense now, and to be honest, there's a very good chance that most of my questions will never be cleared-up during my lifetime.

So what does one do with such dilemmas? Where can we turn to? Who can we talk with to find some thread of hope to get through such difficult times? My father and mother raised us to believe that life is difficult. I don't recall ever being taught that life was a cakewalk. They shared with us that tough days would come our way and the pangs of life would knock on our doors, quite hard at times. We would have moments where life couldn't be better but there would also be days, and sometimes seasons, where life just seemed unbearable.

So I've had to ask myself the question again, where is God through all of this? I don't want to conjure up some form of hokey answers to appease my emotions. I want something of substance, something that is true, that will last and have duration, and most of all have meaning for the now and beyond. Predicting the future isn't something I'm good at, as is the case for most people. However, what I can do is carefully look back and see if I recognize God's active presence on my life and that includes both the good and difficult times. If I can find a pattern of "God's handprints" on my life, then I can surely trust that he will be consistent and be there for my future.

Just think, for a moment, of individuals who have been there in your past, especially in the most trying of circumstances. It was their presence that made you trust and appreciate their consistency. Their actions were consistent with their behaviors. These friends are rare and hard to come by. It's because of their consistent behavior in

your life that you can say (with almost certainty) that they would be there for you in the future. I believe we can hold God to that same standard.

Before examining my life, I felt it was most appropriate to see what scripture had to say about God's presence in human history. When I look at Moses, a man who was raised in royalty and given much, I find him later in his life spending 40 years in the wilderness before he was given the task to lead the entire nation of Israel out of Egyptian slavery. At an early age, Joseph was betrayed by his own family and then sold into prison for 13 years. Yet, scripture makes it clear that God was with him through those difficult and lonely years. Later on, he was raised from the bowels of prison and placed second in command to lead the most powerful nation at that time. Job, a man most respected in his own country and declared as righteous by God himself, yet He allowed him to suffer and lose everything (including his children). Job had plenty of questions for God, but, for some strange reason, God never answered any of them. He does, however, tell him that he was in control of the entire situation and to simply trust him. This doesn't help us with our questions, but it does demonstrate God's activeness within each situation.

Perhaps, the most dramatic example of God's very presence is with his own son – Jesus Christ. Besides the great things we read in scripture about Christ's ability to usher in the Kingdom of God, which is seen by his miraculous signs and wonders, we sometimes fail to see the painful moments he experienced. I don't think it's by chance that the Holy Scriptures include these "God moments" – where the divine intersected humanity through the person of Christ. Have you ever stopped to notice the intense moments of betrayal Christ faced? We see rejection and betrayal made plain through the Scribes and Pharisees (the scholars of the day), his own disciples (his most trusted companions), his home town of Nazareth (the community which helped raised him), and most significantly, his own family (his own flesh and blood). With the death of his

close friend Lazarus, we see real, human tears stream down his face. And then, in the Garden of Gethsemani, we see a very human side of Christ. Notice all the human emotions this passage points out:

“Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I pray.’ He took with him Peter, James, and John, and began to be *troubled and distressed*. Then he said to them, ‘My *soul is sorrowful* even to death. Remain here and keep watch.’ He advanced a little and fell to the ground and *prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass* by him; he said, ‘Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. *Take this cup away from me*, but not what I will but what you will.” the entire.”<sup>2</sup>

Here we see Christ begging God (his own father) to remove the burden of having to face his own death. Christ knows he has the power to abandon his mission. In a moment’s time, he can prevent this most horrific form of human suffering (i.e., getting beaten, flogged, and crucified on the cross). It has been said that because he knew his purpose and mission that he chose to obey the will of his Father. But I would go one step further and say that when he questioned going through this unsightly death, he quickly saw images of you and I flash before his mind. As he saw what was ahead for him, he also saw what was ahead for us, which included our pains, our sufferings, and our feelings of great loss. He even saw your hurts as you watched your loved one pass on to eternity. He knew what you were feeling the moment you got the call that your loved one was killed by a drunk driver. He was there when you noticed men in blue and white arrive at your door to tell you your son or daughter was tragically killed in war. With each lonely moment Christ faced, he was in a very real sense, stepping into our own loneliness. Therefore, I would say that it here that we see God’s immense love for us. Unlike what some claim, he understands our pains far deeper and greater than we understand our

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 14:32-36

own. When you mourn, he mourns; and when you rejoice, he smiles and rejoices with you.

It is with this backdrop that I can trust God will be a faithful friend to me. But he is far more than a faithful companion; he is a God who cares deeply about me and will seek after me when I'm feeling lost or hopeless. Even when I feel he has abandoned me or when I question his presence, I'm reminded of many in scripture who felt the same way. I'm not alone, nor are you. Like you, they wondered if he was truly there as he said he was.

It's ok to question, be angry, and express your most intimate feelings. God desires that we express our emotions. I'm sure he's tired of the fakery that some of us Christians walk around with, as if we're fine and couldn't be any better. I even think some of us are waiting for God to majestically show up and give us answers to our whys. We sit passively waiting and yet, I don't see anywhere in scripture where God is waiting for the right moment to show up and dish out answers. If anything, he's waiting patiently for us to honestly tell him that we need him. There have been many days when I just sat and expressed my frustration with him, which God wants. But I believe he also wants us to desperately call out to him, to plea with him, and express that we're truly lost without him.

Listen to me. This reflection is not meant to be a theological treatise of sorts. It's really my journey of frustration with God, of questioning his actual presence in my life after my dad passed away. It's something I'm working through but, surprisingly, this process has helped me understand God a little better, although not fully.

As I share my struggles, I am slowly learning that he wants more than expressions of grief, pain, heartache, abandonment, losses, fears, and much more. He knows exactly what I'm feeling and longs for me to be transparent with him. If we expect our loved



ones to be open and honest with us, then it wouldn't be unreasonable for God to want the same from us. But you and I must go one step further – we must let go of trying to control our circumstances (which we can't really control) and yield everything to him...at least give him a try. If we want to sense his presence, then we must first pursue an authentic relationship with him, not a “devotion-only relationship.”

God is personally calling me back to what I know to be true. It's a brokenness that is far more than tears or a bending of the knees; it's a bending of the heart and a breaking of the will. I confess that my own pride has gotten in the way at times of what God desires for me, and I'm sure he has longed to “speak” with me on several occasions. But, perhaps, I was too full of myself to even listen to him. Thankfully, God is patient with me and aware that the process of healing is different for everyone.

As hard as it is to believe, God desires a relationship with us more than we desire one with him. I don't believe he wants us to wonder if he is really “there” for us, although he understands we will ponder such thoughts. He longs for us to know without a doubt that he's there, that he cares about every detail of our lives – especially those deep hurts of our soul.

As I've looked back on my life, I've concluded that he has always been there for me and, in a few instances, he even spared my life. Is my conclusion a matter of faith? Of course it is. Maybe that's where God wants to me start – by simply trusting him. Here are some instances where I believe God was there for me, even when I was unaware:

- When I sat on the operating table and the surgeon looked directly into my eyes and with amazement said, “Kid, you're lucky to be alive. If that ball hit you a half inch higher than where it hit you (in the head), you would be dead.” **You were there!**
- When I sat all alone in the mountains of Virginia, wondering what my future would be like, **You were there!**

- As I waited patiently for months to see if I would get accepted into any of the graduate schools of choice, **You were there!**
- When I found out the girl I dated for six years left me for someone else, **You were there!**
- When I was young and told by someone I respected that I would never amount to anything and that I would be dependent on someone else, it was You who carried me through four graduate degree programs. **You were there!**
- When I was beaten-up and publicly mocked in boarding school because my peers found out I believed in You, **You were there.**
- When I was left alone in a three-story home that was on fire, You “carried” me out of that building. **You were there!**
- When that young man lifted me off the ground and began to choke me, you spared my life and gave me another chance to live. **You were there!**
- When the policeman came to the hospital and shared that mom should have been killed by the extent of her accident, **You were there!**
- When dad and mom were hit from behind off the Belt Parkway by a drunk driver, they amazingly walked away alive. **You were there.**
- When I laid in the hospital bed, wondering if I would ever walk again and my closest friend questioned if there was some sin which caused my condition, **You were there!**
- When I almost drowned in my neighbor’s pool, you saved me from my last breathe, **You were there!**
- When I took those long road trips and openly talked with you, and even poured out my heart, questioning both your goodness and your actions, You patiently listened to me. **You were there.**
- When my friends asked me to do something I knew I couldn’t do, even when I lost those friendships, **You were still my friend.**
- When I sat in my bed while at boarding school (in 8<sup>th</sup> grade) with the lights off, a flashlight in my hand, my bible opened, and tears slowly dripping onto the pages, **You were there.**
- When my college roommate began treating me differently with his friends for an entire year for reasons I never understood at the time until the facts came out a year later, **You were there.**
- When I laid completely on my back as dad drove me from VA to NY and I just pondered my future, **You were there.**
- When people befriended me because of what I could do on the athletic field and then treated me entirely differently off the field, You loved me both on and off the field. **You were there.**

- When my brother Kristian and I climbed the highest mountain in Virginia while in college, and openly shared how much we cared for each other, You reminded me of the gift he was to me. *You were there.*
- When dad and I walked hand-in-hand, father-with-son, down that dark path in the woods late at night, *You were there.*
- When I had to go by myself each week to the “room” for kids who had learning disabilities, *You were there.*
- When I was publicly humiliated in front of my entire class for standing up for what I believed to be true, even when my colleagues were scared to say anything to the professor, *You were there!*
- When I felt betrayed by someone I loved very dearly and watched the end of a longstanding friendship, it was you who faithfully wiped my tears. *You were there!*
- When I watched dad suffer such a painful death, especially during those six, long weeks, *You were even there!*
- At the moment I saw my father passed into eternity, *You were there by my side!*
- As I’ve waited by the phone to get critical test results from the doctor, wondering if God was calling me home early (and still do), *You were there then and will be in the future!*

You may still be questioning if God really left you high and dry now that your loved one is gone. If you still feel this way, let me remind you with one last thing. Did you realize that on the cross, Christ felt alone also? He openly expressed his feelings of abandonment by his own father?

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi,[a] lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, *why have you forsaken me?*"<sup>3</sup>

Here he is, dying on the cross and blurting out these painful words to his own father. He’s basically saying, “why have you left me alone to die?” If we’ve ever seen the most transparent emotion of Christ, it is here. The story would be very sad if it ended

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<sup>3</sup>Matthew 27:46

here. But we find in both the gospels and other authenticated documents that Christ was recognized and seen by many after his death. Therefore, even if God left his son all alone on the cross, it may have been for a moment. Christ's return reminds us that even when we feel all alone and abandoned, God won't leave us there. In fact, he's somehow there all along and will pull us through whatever we're facing. Just as he was there for his son, so will he be there for you.

**Principle:** Just because you can't see or feel God, doesn't mean he isn't there for you. He is more present than you realize.