

ONE

“I Didn’t Want to Be a Christian, but . . .” *The Pursuing God*

 Sara Miles did not want to be a Christian. Anne Lamott did not want to be a Christian. C. S. Lewis did not want to be a Christian. Neither did R. A. Torrey, Ziya Meral, Lin Yutang, Jim Vaus, or a dozen others I could name.

How do people find God when they’re running away from Him as fast as they can? Those of us who have agonized over our spiritual journeys know it’s hard to find Him when you’re searching for Him with all your might—when you’re praying, reading scripture, hearing sermons, seeking guidance from Christian friends and pastors. I’ve read of seekers throughout history who have spent days, months, even years reaching out to God and wrestling with doubts over their salvation. Some of them never do find complete assurance. So how much hope is there for those who simply don’t want to be bothered with God? What about those who are actively hostile toward Him or who don’t even believe He exists or who dislike Christians and Christianity so much that they would be horrified to think of themselves as having any association with such people?

Sara Miles was not fond of Christians. She describes herself as “a blue-state, secular intellectual; a lesbian, a left-wing journal-

ist with a habit of skepticism." Although her grandparents were Christian missionaries, her parents rejected what they saw as "the whole unbelievable, illogical concept" of God, and they raised their daughter in an atheist home. Most of what she associated with Christianity—"ecstatic teen crusaders in suburban megachurches, slick preachers proclaiming the 'gospel' of prosperity, and shrewd political organizers who rail against evolution, gay marriage, and stem-cell research"—she loathed. What could Christianity possibly have to offer her? "I had no particular affection for this figure named 'Jesus,'" she writes, "no echo of childhood friendly feeling for the guy with the beard and the robes."¹ Why would she even consider turning her life upside down and facing the derision of her family and her entire social circle in order to embrace Him?

Anne Lamott does not sound like a good candidate for Christianity either. Like Sara Miles, she grew up in a household of atheists where belief in God was scorned. "None of the adults in our circle believed," wrote Lamott. "Believing meant that you were stupid. Ignorant people believed, uncouth people believed, and we were heavily couth."² As an adult, Lamott became a successful novelist but also became entangled in drug addiction, alcoholism, bulimia, and unhappy love affairs. Her friends were "brilliant hilarious progressive" people who would not comprehend someone in their circle turning to a faith like Christianity.

For someone like Ziya Meral, the cost of becoming a Christian would be even higher than facing the derision of skeptical friends and family, though he would encounter that adamant opposition. As a young man with a Muslim background living in Turkey, becoming a Christian would mean isolation, fear, economic deprivation, shame, loneliness, and the unlikelihood of marriage. Why would he put himself through this?

"Big Jim" Vaus made his living in the 1940s doing illegal wire-tapping for Hollywood stars and later for organized crime boss Mickey Cohen. Expanding his work beyond bugging phones in

high-profile divorce cases and other such work for politicians and businessmen, Vaus helped create a system to withhold horserace results from going out over the wire service for about ninety seconds so that bets could be illegally placed. This lucrative criminal activity would certainly not be compatible with Christianity. For Vaus, becoming a Christian not only would mean a change of occupation but also would require repentance, restitution, and the possibility of retaliation by the mobsters he was leaving behind. Why would a career criminal even consider such a move?

Jesus Shows Up and Changes Everything

Each of those individuals became a Christian; none sought God. Instead, they and others like them describe a process of God pursuing them, and His presence was not always welcome. As another reluctant convert, C. S. Lewis, put it, "Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about 'man's search for God.' To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat."³

When Anne Lamott sensed the presence of Jesus in her room, she was in distinctly unreligious circumstances. Leading up to that night, she had hit a crisis with her alcohol and drug use. She believed she would die soon, but "out of nowhere" it crossed her mind to speak to a priest at a nearby Episcopal church whom some family friends had told her about. She did believe in God but said, "Mine was a patchwork of God, sewn together from bits of rag and ribbon, Eastern and Western, pagan and Hebrew, everything but the kitchen sink and Jesus."⁴ Her discussions with the priest helped push her a little further toward belief, and not long afterward she began attending St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City, California, because she liked the music she heard coming out of it as she walked by on Sunday mornings. She stayed only for the music and left before the sermon was preached.

Anne became pregnant around this time, had an abortion, and that's when Jesus showed up. Weak from bleeding and "shaky and

sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill," she lay in bed and became aware of the presence of someone in the room with her. "The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this." Even now, she did not welcome Him. She was "appalled," worried about what her friends would think if she became a Christian. Her conversion seemed "an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, 'I would rather die.'"⁵ She felt Jesus with her there all night, watching her in patience and love, but she did not invite Him into her life until a week later, alone in her houseboat.

For Sara Miles, it was also an encounter with Jesus—unexpected, unsought—that transformed her. One day out of curiosity she walked into St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in San Francisco. "I had no earthly reason to be there. I'd never heard a gospel reading, never said the Lord's Prayer. I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian—or, as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut." She looked around, admired the beauty of the church's interior, and took a seat, hoping no one would notice her. She sang with everyone else, feeling a little ridiculous, and then a woman announced, "Jesus invites everyone to His table."

Miles went forward and stood at the table. After more singing, someone put a "piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying, 'the body of Christ,' and handed me the goblet of sweet wine, saying, 'the blood of Christ,' and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me."

That was Miles' moment of conversion, but it so bewildered her that she immediately sought alternate explanations. The word "Jesus" lodged in her mind, and she said it over and over, not knowing why. "But it was realer than any thought of mine, or even any subjective emotion: It was as real as the actual taste of the bread and

the wine. And the word was indisputably in my body now, as if I’d swallowed a radioactive pellet that would outlive my own flesh.”⁶

What About All Those Unanswered Questions?

It’s one thing to have a dramatic encounter with Jesus in a heightened spiritual moment, but what happens to these reluctant Christian converts once the moment fades and they have time to rethink it? What happens the next day? Or a week later? Or a year after the event? They’re still the same skeptical, intelligent people who had rejected Christianity for years, so wouldn’t a strong impulse rise to explain away what had happened to them?

Or what happens when the costs start to kick in? How do these resistant believers face the scorn of that first friend to whom they declare, “I have become a Christian,” contradicting everything they have stood for up to that point? What happens to these God-pursued converts when their decision to be a follower of Jesus threatens their livelihoods or their very lives? In purely human terms, wouldn’t it make sense for them to reconsider or redefine their experience or, in the interests of self-preservation, let the incident fade away?

The whole process by which resistant believers find God—or He finds them—is nothing like what I would expect. These people have strong objections to Christianity. They have a lifetime of experience and training that has helped them compile a long list of reasons they should stay away from this religion and the followers who practice it. What I would expect, then, is that before they came to Christ, they would seek some opportunity to present these objections and doubts and get solid answers to them. Why, they might ask, is Christianity better than any other way of communing with a higher power? Why should they turn to Christ when most of their friends do fine without Him? The list of objections would vary for each person, but everyone would have plenty of questions. Only

after each objection on the list had been checked off as adequately answered could they safely give their lives to Jesus Christ.

It rarely happens that way.

Jesus catches people mid-stream. Sometimes He shows up when they least expect and least want Him. Sometimes He finds them when they're children, sometimes when they're on their deathbed. Some of their objections to Him may have been answered, but many others remain, and many have not even occurred to them yet. But there He is, His presence loving and patient and inviting. And they either accept His invitation or they don't.

Believers aren't people who have answered every question about Jesus. They are people who have met Him.

A Grip So Powerful They Can't Escape It

One thing I love about these stories is that once these skeptical believers finally confront the God who has lodged himself inconveniently on their paths, the experience is so transforming that they can't turn away from Him even when every other circumstance cries out for them to do so.

Turkish Muslim Ziya Meral was only seventeen years old when against all expectations he encountered Christ on a visit to an Anglican church he went to after reading a derogatory article about the church in a newspaper. How could he possibly tell his family about his conversion? He says, "I remember how fearful I was and how isolated and alone I felt as I lay in the fetal position in a sleeping bag on a friend's floor."

Not a heartwarming introduction to the Christian life. And his spiritual journey has never gotten easier. Many years later Meral writes, "I am still broke, sober, and single after all these years, and I still struggle with shame, loneliness, and fear." At times the cost of being a Christian has been almost unbearable. "Twice," Meral says, "I came close to giving up my faith. On one of those occasions, I genuinely doubted whether or not Jesus was worth all the pain,

and on the other I struggled with my commitment to work in the Middle East and the continuous price I pay, when I could have easily settled into a comfortable Christian life in a Western country."

What keeps him going? Jesus grips him so powerfully that Meral defines his own suffering as a way to identify with Christ: "But our highest good is not a problem-free life; it is to be like the Son." He quotes the scripture written by Paul—another believer who suffered greatly—that says,

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you (*2 Corinthians 4:10-12*).

Meral has every earthly reason not to be a Christian. To most people around him who do not share his belief, his decision to be a Christian undoubtedly makes no sense at all. But what Meral cannot escape—even in the midst of pain, isolation, and persecution—is the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit. He writes,

We do know where God is in the midst of persecution. He is there, right with us, in us. He is present through our lives, words, pain, and deaths. . . . He is not distant from our pain; he is in prison with us, he is naked, he is beaten, he is raped, and he is killed! We know that he is not quiet, but is speaking powerfully through the lives, suffering, and death of his children.⁷

Even Under Enormous Stress, Their Faith Holds

What inspires me about radically transformed believers like Meral, Miles, and Lamott is how they maintain their faith in the isolated, private moments that never make it into a memoir or article—moments when fellow Christians hurt them or disappoint them, times when they're outraged by the actions of fellow believers on the opposite end of the political spectrum, times of weariness,

when doubt creeps in and when, in the midst of the annoying and exhausting difficulties of life, Jesus seems simply too remote even to be real.

Most Christians go through periods like that, but I'm inclined to think that for the reluctant convert who didn't want to be a Christian in the first place and who is daily already paying a price for it, these times of discouragement would be particularly dangerous. That's when they would be tempted to think, *My friends were right! I never should have converted to this faith. These Christians are just as bad as I was warned they would be. I've made a fool of myself. I need to get out of this!*

Opportunities for exiting the faith exist at every turn. No believer *has* to remain a Christian, least of all those with so many incentives not to believe. These reluctant believers, pursued by God, stay in, because deep within them is the love and the presence of a Savior more powerful and more sustaining than the doubts that afflict them.

"Big Jim" Vaus, considered as organized crime's best wire-tapper, was assigned to go to St. Louis in November 1949 to work on a major project for his mob bosses. He never made it. Instead, he took a detour to a Billy Graham crusade in Los Angeles. As Vaus's son Will describes it,

That night Graham preached on the passage in the gospels in which Jesus queried, "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world but lose his own soul?" My father felt as if God were speaking directly to him. He committed his life to Jesus Christ that night and immediately set about repaying everyone he had ever cheated or from whom he had stolen.⁸

For a career criminal, especially one employed by gangsters with no reluctance to kill people who cross them, becoming a Christian is extremely inconvenient and dangerous. Restitution is not easy. How many times throughout that long process must Vaus have been tempted to second-guess his commitment to Christ? What about

when he told ruthless mob boss Mickey Cohen he could no longer work for him? What about when he later had to testify against Cohen in court? What about when he changed his own false testimony that he had given to a grand jury, which had led to an innocent police officer being jailed? Was the possibility of being prosecuted for perjury—assuming one of his enemies didn’t kill him first—worth it in order to be a follower of Jesus Christ?

At any step of the way, Vaus could have retreated to his old lifestyle. He could have played it safe. His commitment to pay back those from whom he had stolen cost him dearly. His son writes, “My parents sold almost all of their worldly assets: car, house and furniture. When Dad had finished going through his restitution list of thirty some odd people, he and Mom had nothing left but the clothes on their backs, but at least Dad was able to repay everyone who asked for it.”⁹

Vaus could have made it easier on himself. He at least could have kept silent about his faith and decided not to repay those he had stolen from. But he was pursued by a God who was bigger than the threat of money problems or prison or retaliation. As he told one reporter, “Jim Vaus is dead. . . . The man you were looking for, the one who used to do wiretapping and sell the recordings to the highest bidder, that man is dead. I’m a new man. It’s like the Bible says: ‘If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature.’”¹⁰

God Is Out to Get Us

If God pursues and finds Vaus and the other reluctant converts mentioned in this chapter—people with cultural, social, political, moral, and criminal reasons to avoid Him—then who can be said to be beyond His grasp? For whom is it safe to conclude, *this* person is too far from God to ever reach Him? This one is too hostile toward Him—too vulgar, too sarcastic and dismissive, too evil.

The question of who is too far gone for God to reach is a question people have been asking for centuries. They even asked Jesus essen-

tially the same thing. It was couched as a nasty comment. Luke 15:1 says that the "tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear" Jesus. Instead of being happy that the truth of Jesus' message was so powerful that it could attract even these unlikely followers, "the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them'" (Luke 15:2). How scandalous! The religious elite didn't want God pursuing *those* people. If He lets *them* in, then who could possibly be excluded?

Jesus answered their muttering with the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, better known as the story of the prodigal son. All three stories are about lost things that are doggedly pursued by a determined person who values them. In the first one a shepherd has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. He leaves the ninety-nine to pursue the lost one, and then he calls his friends and neighbors together to rejoice once he finds it. In the next story a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. She searches until she finds it; then she celebrates with friends and neighbors.

You might think that for God, ninety-nine out of a hundred sheep would be enough. Nine out of ten coins should be plenty. What's one sheep or one coin more or less when you have so many? Plenty of people seek God voluntarily and then devote their whole lives to Him. So why would He bother putting forth so much effort to find people like Anne Lamott, Ziya Meral, Jim Vaus? Or me? Or you? Yet I feel that pursuing Spirit of God moving deep within me. I'm grateful because I know I'm the lost coin He'll turn the house upside down to find. I'm the lost sheep He'll search the countryside to hunt down. I'm grateful that finding God does not depend on my effort alone. Even if I'm hostile, deluded, full of sin, indifferent, He still wants me. Even when I'm running away or merely standing still, He is still running toward me, arms outstretched.

A Father running with arms outstretched is at the heart of Jesus' most famous parable—perhaps the most famous parable ever told. The story is usually labeled that of the prodigal son, but it

could also be called the story of the rebellious son, the lost sons, or even better, the forgiving father or the pursuing father. The younger of two sons runs away from his father and squanders his share of the estate in wild living, burning his bridges to his family in the process. The father has no further obligation to him. The son has made his choice, and now in all fairness he should have to live with the consequences.

The rebellious son ends up hungry, poverty-stricken, regretful. He comes to his senses. Out of options, he decides to slink back to his father and offer to work for him as a hired man. That's the best he can realistically hope for, and even that outcome is more than the father is morally or legally obligated to give.

Slinking Back to Dad

I know the humiliation of having to creep back to my father after having messed up in a big way. I got my driver's license when I was sixteen. I had a job after school, so my dad gave me his old car and got another one for himself. It was a generous thing for him to do, and it also helped him avoid another problem he didn't want to deal with—he didn't want me borrowing his car. Dad was finicky about his cars. They were spotless, well-maintained, beautifully cared for. He didn't want some teenager, or anybody else, getting in there and messing them up. The car he gave me still belonged to him, and he expected me to be careful with it. Reverence for cars had long been a part of a household in which both my dad and sister worked for General Motors and where my dad had restored old cars.

That made my careless and stupid wreck all the more embarrassing. It happened in our neighborhood, and my car was the only one involved, so I had no one but myself to blame. I was a terrible driver. To get out of the neighborhood, I had to make a narrow turn—or at least it seemed narrow to me—at a street where a guardrail jutted out at a right angle. If I turned too wide, my car would go into the wrong lane of the street I was turning onto and

hit any oncoming cars. If I turned too sharply, I would hit the corner of the guardrail.

I turned too sharply. The guardrail sliced into the passenger door like the iceberg ripping into the *Titanic*. At that point I should have stopped. I could have backed away from the guardrail and limited the damage. Instead, out of panic, or some irrational hope of pulling away from the rail by moving forward, I kept going, and I heard the scraping of metal all the way to the end of the car.

I pulled to the side of the road and felt the cold layer of sweat wash over me. I got out to inspect the damage. Maybe it wasn't as bad as I feared. Maybe it was just a scratch that I could buff out without even telling Dad.

It was bad. The door and fender were caved in beyond all buffing. I could not wish this away. I could not deny this or blame somebody else for it or defend it. I had to take the car home and show Dad what a stupid thing I had done. What would it cost me? How could I bring myself to tell him to come out to the driveway to look? I stood for a long time in silence and stared at my mangled car.

He Should Turn His Back on You, But Instead . . .

This brings me back to the story of the prodigal son. You know how the story ends, but don't let the familiarity of it blind you from its power. Perhaps you're the rebellious son. You don't want to creep back to your father. This was not your plan. You're not sure you can make yourself do it. Your attitudes toward your father change from moment to moment. Sometimes you *fear* him because of what you've done, but at other times you *resent* him because you're in this humiliating position toward him. Shouldn't he have done more to prevent you from getting into such a mess? He didn't *have* to give you your inheritance. Isn't this his fault as much as yours?

You *dread* him one moment, but in the next you realize he's your only hope. Sometimes you want to run to him and get it over with, then think maybe a slow death would be better.

Finally you edge toward him, but at any moment you may change your mind and run in the other direction. Then something completely unexpected happens. Against cultural tradition, protocol, fairness, and good sense, your father does not wait for you to reach him. He should stay home and let you beg. Forgiving you at that point would be magnanimous enough. Instead, he loves you so much that the moment he sees you, the moment he knows you're headed in his direction, he *runs to meet you*. You won't arrive home alone. He'll usher you in. As Luke 15:20 puts it, "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

This is not the painful homecoming you expected. The father throws a celebration for you. You get the best robe, a ring for your finger, and sandals for your feet. You'll eat the fattened calf at your party. The extravagance is downright embarrassing. You don't deserve all this.

Timothy Keller, who has written an insightful book on this parable, points out that the word "prodigal" does not mean *wayward*, but "recklessly spendthrift." It means spending until you have nothing left. This term is therefore as appropriate for describing the father in the story as his younger son. The father's welcome to the repentant son was literally reckless, because he refused to 'reckon' or count his sin against him or demand repayment."¹¹

When I think back to how my father reacted when I crept back home to show him his car I had so stupidly wrecked, he reacted with more restraint and patience than I deserved, which was a big relief to me. But I had to live with the consequences of my actions. I drove around in a smashed-in car for the next few years.

The father's action in the prodigal son story would be like my father looking at my wrecked car and saying, "Look what you've done! Now that this car is damaged, let me take you out to the dealership right now and buy you a brand new sports car." No one—least of all me—would expect that kind of magnanimous reaction

to a son smashing up a car that had been given to him. Many would even call it bad, reckless parenting to buy the son a new car in such a case. And what would my sister say if she pulled into our driveway in her carefully preserved junker and saw that Dad had bought me a new Corvette after I had plowed my old car into a guard rail?

God's love, His forgiveness, His pursuit, goes far beyond common sense, far beyond what we would do or what we would expect any reasonable God to do. I was far from God, I was dreading Him, but He ran after me, hugged me, lavished me with gifts, and prepared a party.

Sara Miles heard the same message on the day she was told, "Jesus invites everyone to His table." She ate and drank and was home. The same Jesus hunkered down in Anne Lamott's room as she lay shaky from bleeding in the aftermath of an abortion and drinking and drugs. He chased her down, and she let Him in. The same God ran to Jim Vaus as the wire-tapper took what he thought was a quick detour to a Billy Graham crusade on his way to commit another crime.

It's so easy to identify with the rebellious younger brother in Jesus' parable that I usually don't give much thought to the older brother. But Keller shows that the older brother, the "good" one, also rebels and has just as much need for the father's pursuing, patient love as the young one.

The older brother feels cheated and demeans his father by refusing to go in to the feast. The pursuing father comes out to him to urge him to come in, but the son refuses to speak respectfully to him. As Keller explains, "He refuses to address him in the elaborately respectful manner that inferiors owed superiors in that culture, particularly in public. He does not say 'esteemed father' but simply 'Look!'—which is equivalent to 'Look, you!'"¹²

What is the significance of this older son's rebellion? No one, not even the "good" people who follow all the rules, can earn salvation through good deeds. Only God's initiating love can save them.

Keller writes of this man, "Pride in his good deeds, rather than remorse over his bad deeds, was keeping the older son out of the feast of salvation. The elder brother's problem is his self-righteousness, the way he uses his moral record to put God and others in his debt to control them to do what he wants."¹³

Will he drop his rebellion and respond to the father's love? The story doesn't say. The Pharisees and other "older brother" types in Jesus' audience, both then and now, would have to decide how their own stories would end.

"Your Beauty and Love Chase After Me."

Even as a long-time Christian, I still feel God's loving pursuit. In one sense, my faith, and the continued existence of the entire Christian Church, for that matter, hangs by a frail thread. I could walk away whenever I want. Belief in Christ and my ties to the Church do not bind me legally and contractually in the same way, for instance, that I am legally bound to my wife and children or my job, or even my mortgage. I recently started serving on our church board, and one of the first duties was to approve the budget for the following year. As I reviewed the rows of numbers detailing the budget lines for children's ministries and building funds and salaries, the thought occurred to me, *What if all these people giving this money—or even half of them—suddenly walked away?* No one is forcing them to stay in the church or to keep giving even if they do stay. Only a couple of people in the church even *know* how much individuals give.

Some people do drop out, but the vast majority stay. They keep coming to church, keep giving, keep believing in Christ, keep trying to follow Him better. People get offended, they hurt each other's feelings, they do things they shouldn't and have to keep asking for forgiveness, but still they keep believing, keep coming back. Sometimes my own skepticism flares up, I get angry with the church, I get bored or bogged down with difficulties or feel unappreciated or

misunderstood. Quitting is a temptation, but someone deeper than all those problems—the pursuing, loving, embracing Holy Spirit—keeps me and my fellow believers connected to Him and the church with a deep bond. No matter how discouraged I get, God’s deeper sustaining love and purpose hold on to me. As Eugene Peterson paraphrases a verse from Psalm 23,

*Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.*

*I’m back in the house of Yahweh
for the rest of my life (Psalm 23:6, TM).*

I wish I could keep the image of God the Pursuer more consistently in my thoughts. I spend much of my Christian life striving to prove myself to Him by working to make up for past misdeeds. There are so many things I don’t understand but want to. There are so many ways I fail but wish I didn’t. Can I follow Jesus with integrity? Do my spiritual weaknesses disqualify me? It’s a comfort to know I’m not in some competition in which only the strongest and most competent survive. God still wants me—not just *accepts* me but is actively searching me out—even if I’m that hundredth sheep lost out there in the bushes while everybody else seems to have known enough to stay in the fold. And when He finds me, His attitude is not to berate me or make me pay, but instead He calls everyone together and celebrates.

When it comes to God pursuing a reluctant convert, one person has a story no one else can match. We’ll consider his miraculous encounter with God—and what it means for the rest of us—in the next chapter.

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