

Chapter 1

We do not err because truth is difficult to see. It is visible at a glance. We err because this is more comfortable.

-- Alexander Solzhenitsyn

It was early evening when I finally arrived home from work. I lived in Sugar Land, a small but vibrant community just outside Houston, Texas, where the traffic is horrendous. My wife was visiting her ailing grandmother in Chicago and my two sons were out doing who-knows-what to who-knows-who so the house was quiet for a change. It began to rain just as I arrived home and, being that it was November there was a chill in the air that made it feel much colder than it was. The humidity in Houston is always high, normally eighty-five to ninety-five percent so the cold feels even colder than the thermometer indicates. I lit a fire in our gas fireplace and watched as the fake embers began to glow. I really preferred to burn wood but the smoke and ash always made the house smell unpleasant so I converted the fireplace to gas a few years earlier. So, here I was, sitting in a quiet room, fireplace blazing, cold and rainy outside and a warm cup of coffee by my side. This was the perfect atmosphere for reading. I pulled out the Bible, as was my practice at such contemplative times, and began to read. It happens that I opened the book to the eighth chapter of John. When I got to verse thirty-two I read, "And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." For some reason, I stopped reading and began reflecting on all of those questions that had haunted me for so many years. Questions that I had either ignored or simply pushed to the back of my mind. Questions like: if there is only one true God then why are there so many religions? If religion makes people better then why isn't the world getting better? Why do religions that advocate peace, condone violence? How can a loving God allow some people to go to hell? If there is one true religion, which one is it? Certainly, I had always believed it was Christianity, but if that were true then why didn't everyone else realize it too? Why did

they continue to hold onto their false religions? Whose side is God on? Why are there so many inconsistencies and contradictions in the Bible? Is there meant to be one universal religion? The list went on and on. I realized that after all of those years of attending church and teaching Bible studies, these questions still remained. I continued to have doubts about certain aspects of my faith. In fact, as embarrassed as I was to admit it, I even doubted the existence of God. That night I made a commitment to find answers to these questions no matter what I had to do or how long it took or where my journey might lead.

The first thing I needed to decide was where to begin. This was certainly not something that I could do on my own. I'd tried that many times and had gotten nowhere. The preacher at the church I attended seemed to be knowledgeable so I decided to start there. I called the church office and scheduled a meeting for the following day. I spent the rest of the evening making a list of things that I wanted to discuss.

Pastor Greg Watson was in his late thirties. He had graduated from Southwestern Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas. With several years of experience under his belt having ministered in small Texas towns, he moved to Sugar Land and became the pastor of our congregation. Ours was a mid-sized church with about two thousand members. Certainly nothing like the mega-churches that boasted congregations of ten thousand members or more. Pastor Watson was young for a church of this size, but because we had a young congregation, the average member being in their mid-thirties, he could easily identify with their concerns. So, he was a good choice. Of course, one thing lacking in any younger person in any business or situation is experience. Sometimes I think age is not as respected as it should be. Maybe I feel that way because I'm older now. Now in my late forties, I'm realizing how important experience is to seeing life as it really is rather than how we always imagined it should be.

The next morning I arrived at the church a little before ten o'clock. I announced myself and took a seat. The office was decorated with paintings depicting the life of Christ. It was

interesting how each artist saw Christ differently. Some painted him masculine with strong arms and manly features while others depicted him as being frail, almost effeminate. And then there were the crucifixes displayed around the room. I always wondered if gunpowder had been invented in the first century and Jesus had been executed by a firing squad rather than on a cross would our churches and homes be decorated with guns hanging from the wall? Would a rifle have become a pivotal Christian icon? It wasn't long before the secretary invited me to join Pastor Watson in his study.

After we exchanged greetings, I took a seat across the desk from where he was seated. I had been anticipating this meeting all night. It was my hope that after our talk I could lay to rest all of my questions and doubts and get on with my life.

“Derrick, what can I do for you? What’s on your mind?” He got right to the point. I like that. Sometimes people want to make small talk and you lose valuable time for discussing the important issues.

“It might sound funny coming from a person of my age, but I have a few questions about our faith that I would like to discuss.”

“Alright, I’ll help if I can.” He picked up a pen as if he were going to take notes. Instead he just started clicking it the way some people do when they’re nervous.

“For several years now I have been bothered with what seems to be inconsistencies in the scriptures.”

“What do you mean, inconsistencies?” He wrinkled his brow slightly.

“Well,” I continued, “we believe that the Bible teaches that God is love.”

“That’s right.”

“And that God is perfect.”

“Yes. Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent.” He spoke with confidence.

“But the Bible also indicates that God can be filled with wrath and that he can be jealous and envious and sometimes, just.”

“I think that’s true.”

“Well, if God is a God of love and if God is perfect than am I wrong in concluding that God’s love is perfect love?”

“Again, I would have to agree.” I could tell by his expression that he wasn’t sure where this conversation was headed.

“Well, then,” I was coming to the big question, “isn’t there a contradiction here? I mean, if God’s love is perfect then God always loves. Being filled with wrath would not be the result of perfect love. Being jealous would not be the result of perfect love. Even being just would not be a part of love because justice demands that the person being judged is responsible for paying the consequences for their wrongdoing, whereas perfect love would always provide forgiveness and, therefore, the guilty would not be held accountable for their wrongdoing as the law requires.”

“God is perfect in all that he does,” the pastor responded. “So, he is perfect in love but he is also perfect in wrath. That means that his wrath is justified by our actions.”

“But if God’s love is perfect then there is no justification for wrath in any situation. Being angry is a result of something happening that we didn’t know was going to happen and we get angry as a response to someone’s behavior that surprises us. Our reaction to this surprising behavior is anger. If we had known that they were going to act a certain way or do a certain thing we would not be upset or angry because we would have already known what they were going to do and we would have been prepared for it. Christianity claims that God is omniscient so he already knows what is going to happen and therefore should not be caught off-guard. And, being perfectly loving, he would have

already forgiven the person for acting in an unacceptable way. It is the same with jealousy. Perfect knowledge means perfect understanding because he knows all things; all the motives, all the circumstances, all our weaknesses, and therefore, that perfect knowledge that leads to perfect understanding would lead to perfect forgiveness because of God's perfect love. And certainly, as I mentioned, justice is not consistent with perfect love, even if it is perfect justice."

He thought for a moment. "But God has given us the freedom to make our own decisions. We call that free will. We are responsible for our decisions. God loves us, but we can choose whether or not to accept that love. That acceptance comes through acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world."

"But Christianity claims that the Bible indicates that God's love is unconditional. Unconditional means without condition."

"If you accept God's offer of salvation through Jesus, his son," he replied.

"You just used the word 'if'. You said it's unconditional 'if'. Unconditional love has no 'ifs'. The minute you say it's unconditional 'if' or 'but' or 'when' you are putting a condition on love and it is no longer unconditional! You say the Bible also says that God's love for us is a covenant and not a contract. That means that God's love for us is not contingent on anything that we do, it is one-sided and we cannot affect it in any way. If God's love for us is unconditional and it is a covenant, then it is for everyone everywhere and there are no conditions, period. I love my sons. They have absolutely no control over my love for them. They can reject my love, they can make a conscious decision to hate me, but they can never make me stop loving them. So, can we have control over God's love for us or is it unconditional and a covenant? Do I love my sons more than God loves his creation?"

Pastor Watson leaned back in his chair and gazed at me. I guess he was trying to absorb all of my aimless rambling. Finally he leaned forward and put his elbows on the desk. "How

long have you been a part of the Christian faith?” His voice was stern, almost defensive.

“About thirty years,” I answered.

“Then you should know that these are deep theological questions that were settled hundreds of years ago. These are questions of faith. There are things we can’t understand. They are beyond our comprehension. Certainly, God is one of those incomprehensible things.”

“But it seems that Christianity and all other religions talk as if they *do* have it figured out,” I argued. “They describe God as if they know exactly who he is. The Bible explains it, doesn’t it? It gives us certain characteristics of God and yet these characteristics are inconsistent even though God is supposed to be consistent. Look, if we make a list of the characteristics of God as indicated in the Bible we have things like wrathful, loving, angry, retaliatory, just, discriminatory, forgiving, caring, compassionate and jealous to name a few. If you consider all of these character traits, God sounds a lot like my Uncle Frank! Some of these character traits are actually what we consider character flaws, things that we try to teach our children not to do; things like getting angry, being judgmental, desiring retaliation or becoming jealous. Are we saying that we want our kids to be better than God? Help me out here!” I’ll admit that I was getting a little loud, maybe even angry. I really wanted answers and I didn’t perceive that I was going to get them.

“Faith, Derrick, faith,” he said emphatically. “That’s the answer. Since we cannot know the true nature of God, we must depend on his Word and that word is the Bible. It is without flaw, infallible. If it says that God is this way, we must trust that he is and live in the knowledge of that truth.”

“But truth is absolute. These are inconsistencies concerning the very nature of God! Is God perfect or not?”

“The answer is faith. That’s all I can tell you. You really need to spend more time in prayer asking God to help you understand.”

“I have and that’s why I’m here!” I realized that he was giving me the same run-around that everyone else had. He had resorted to the old “faith” speech. Anytime I had a legitimate question concerning religion and no one seemed to have a real answer they always turned to faith as the answer. If you doubted, you didn’t have enough faith. If you didn’t understand something, you didn’t have enough faith. Faith was the answer to all religious questions. Unfortunately, this time for me it wasn’t good enough. I had hoped for more.

“Look,” he said getting up indicating that our discussion had come to an end. “You think about it some more and pray about it and we’ll talk again in the next few weeks. Okay? I’m sure God will give you the answers you need. But remember...faith.”

He ended by praying for me. He prayed that God would lead me to find the answers I was seeking and to accept the things I could not understand. I said, “Amen”. We shook hands and I left. As I got into my car and headed for home I was even more determined to find the truth.