

Chapter One:

We've Come a Long Way, Maybe

The problem with God—or at any rate, one of the top five most annoying things about God—is that He or She rarely answers right away. It can take days, weeks. Some people seem to understand this—that life and change take time. Chou En-lai, when asked, “What do you think of the French Revolution?” paused for a minute—smoking incessantly—then replied, “Too soon to tell.”

(Anne Lamott, 2005, p. 9)

Some of you reading these words likely grew up during the 1960s as I did within the tightly controlled world of North American fundagelical Christianity. (I credit my younger brother and popular evangelical author, Phil Callaway, for coining the term “fundagelical” years ago in a magazine article where I first encountered it. His story titled *Up in Smoke* was later published in one of his books (2002, p. 60). Although I subsequently wrote a doctoral dissertation in religious history wherein I attempted to articulate the difference(s) between fundamentalism and evangelicalism, I have never encountered Phil’s term in wide use in academia. I have nonetheless frequently employed it in my academic involvements because its etymology accurately describes the historic connection that indeed exists between American religious fundamentalism and modern North American evangelicalism. Where you have one, you will invariably have at least some attributes of the other (Tim W. Callaway, 2013, pp. 40–90)).

As anyone raised in such an environment remembers, attendance at worship services (morning AND evening), Sunday school, youth group, family devotions, Backyard Bible Club, Daily Vaca-

tion Bible School and Bible memorization initiatives, *et cetera*, were staples of that particular subculture. My siblings and I participated in them all.

I am grateful for many of those early experiences, if for no other reason than that I possess a vast supply of hilarious accounts that I can and do relate concerning youthful antics carried out (for research purposes!) while active in such. I was fortunate enough to be born into a home where humour and laughter were basic ingredients of our existential diet, thereby assisting us in the challenge of surviving the ever-present strictures of rigid fundamentalism.

As the years passed, however, I came to recognize that a dark cloud loitered behind some of those silver linings. In hindsight, I realize that such traditions may actually have contributed to the acquisition of a more sanctified version of the “it’s all about me” mindset that is in the crosshairs of my thinking in this volume.

For example, we were taught from infancy to revere the godly characters of the Bible such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Miriam, Esther, Ruth, David, and Jezebel.

Okay, Jezebel? Not so much. Via such avenues as lengthy sermons and weekly Christian education hours augmented by a healthy roster of Christian films and books, we were routinely exhorted as youngsters to pattern ourselves after Biblical luminaries and urged to emulate their examples of admirable faith. Although the spiritual failings of these characters may not have been entirely overlooked, they were certainly minimized in favour of focusing on the godlier attributes of the respective personalities.

Additionally, those of us who populated the fundagelical ethos that flourished in the second half of the twentieth century were prompted to follow in the footsteps of virtuous Christian heroes of more recent eras. By means of local church missionary conferences and “biography nights,” related films, filmstrips and slide shows, we were exposed to inspiring accounts of missionary icons such as David Livingstone, Gladys Aylward, J. Hudson Taylor, Isobel

Kuhn, Borden of Yale, Amy Carmichael, Jim and Elizabeth Elliot, and others of lesser renown.

I have frequently explained to those who inquire as to why I trained to become a pastor that it is essential they understand the ideological milieu in which I was raised. The ultimate vocation held out to us as impressionable children was to become a foreign missionary in some far-off region of the world. There, ideally, we would be eaten by cannibals since in the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8, “you shall be my witnesses,” the Greek word for “witnesses” is “*marturioi*” from which the English term “martyrs” derives. Should we have failed to achieve this Grade A, Canada #1 level of Christian commitment, only then was it permissible to settle for the solitary other acceptable vocational pursuit—becoming a pastor or otherwise engaging in some variety of home-missions work. (I do not relate this to be unnecessarily critical or cynical; such an ethos was truly the consciously created reality of the faith community in which I was raised. Many peers from those days have confirmed my assessment in this regard as accurate).

In the fundamentalist home where I grew up, a proper observance of Sundays required us to put aside our *Hardy Boys* mysteries and *Chip Hilton* sports thrillers in honour of reading material considered more suitable for “The Lord’s Day” as Sundays were usually called in those days. In lieu of such comparatively mundane literature, we were directed to volumes from Christian publishers such as Moody Press and Zondervan extolling loftier values like those found in the *Danny Orlis*, *Felicia Cartwright*, *Sugar Creek Gang* series of books and other similar tales. (Interestingly enough, I have since encountered a very insightful unpublished doctoral thesis on the fundamentalist self as such was portrayed in the *Danny Orlis* books (Peters, 1996)).

My parents ensured that missionary biographies were numerous on our bookshelves and frequently invited visiting missionaries into our home for lodging or a meal. Accordingly, by the time I reached

my teenage years, I was certain I had experienced more divine calls to various mission fields than Heinz has pickles.

Early in life, then, I became conversant with the fascinating and often miraculous details of the lives of the heroes of the Bible and other figures in subsequent Christian history. Our parents, teachers and other spiritual leaders challenged and even bribed us to memorize entire chapters of Scripture. It was their fervent hope that we would grasp and adapt the attitudes and behaviours that made these figures such exemplary models of faith.

When I was in elementary school, for example, my parents once promised to reward me with a genuine leather football for reading through the Pentateuch—in the original Hebrew, no less. Not really. I accomplished the challenge in the King James Version which was only minimally easier and thereby earned the football. (My theologically trained friends insist that the trauma I incurred at such an impressionable age is the only reason I adhere today to the post-tribulation stance in my eschatology. In fact, they are adamant in their collective conviction that I survived The Great Tribulation several times during my upbringing).

As children in Sunday School we sang songs like *Only a Boy Named David*, *Dare to Be a Daniel* or *I Will Make You Fishers of Men* as part of a carefully crafted regimen designed to help us acquire and demonstrate the enviable virtues modeled by ancient Bible characters. *How Did Moses Cross the Red Sea?* was one of my childhood favourites if for no other reason than that a fellow scallywag would usually be compensated with a stern rebuke from the teacher(s) for adding some very creative choreography to what, in those days, were called “action choruses.”

Many of us—entire families in some cases—were given first names in accordance with what were identified back in the day as “Bible names.” For instance, I knew early in life that my parents had named me for the Apostle Paul’s spiritual protégé, Timothy, a name composed from two Greek words combined to mean “one who honours God” or “honouring God.” They harboured fervent

hopes that each of their five children would grow up to be people of sterling Christian character. My siblings were named David, Daniel, Ruth, Philip and Tiffany.

Sorry, no Tiffany, although my sister's orthodoxy did come under scrutiny a few years back when she decreed that, henceforth, she wished to be called Carolyn, (her actual first name) and not Ruth (her actual second name) as she had previously been known. Disciplinary hearings are in progress.

Given the environment of my formative years, it strikes me now that we came to view the legendary characters of the Bible as a variation of sorts of what our community regarded to be the errant Roman Catholic Church's beliefs regarding saints. True, we were not encouraged to ask these Biblical icons for some kind of mysterious assistance. Yet we were certainly expected to look up to them as being far superior to us in matters of faith and conduct. And we were also directed to spare no effort in striving to emulate them since they were almost always presented to us as unflinching in their devotion and purity.

Looking back, I see that such personalities always seemed somewhat removed from the reality of our lives by virtue of what we as children perceived to be a kind of super-spirituality. We concluded that, surely, these Biblical figures never told off colour jokes, used "swear words" or smoked cigarettes behind the local drugstore. They had made it into the Bible, hadn't they? How much of the Torah did they have to memorize to get such a gig? Many were listed in Hebrews 11 that was commonly represented to those of us who were sports enthusiasts as "The Hall of Faith."

Few of us in those halcyon days retained much hope of ever rivalling the main characters found in the Bible in terms of the maturity of their exemplary faith. We were content to simply give it our best shot and gladly absorb the periodic compliments our parents and leaders would periodically send our way for demonstrating, in some small way, the faith of a Joseph, a Joshua, an Isaiah or an Elizabeth.

It was not until later in life that I began to see the well-intentioned but nevertheless myopic perspective that made us view the characters of the Bible as some kind of spiritual supermen or superwomen. What surprised me not a little when that revelation occurred was the fact that the Bible very clearly indicates that most personalities in Genesis did not live up to such noble designations.

Not at all.

Was blind but now I see

I had been a pastor in the evangelical sector for about ten years before a warming theological discovery registered with me during a frosty Canadian winter. For reasons I will shortly clarify, I read through the first book of the Bible, Genesis, only to have it become apparent to me as never before that, in fact, some of the heroes of the faith I had come to revere while a child definitely were not the spiritual giants I had assumed them to be. John S. Kselman hits the nail squarely on the head in this respect by asking: “What do you make of the fact that every family in Genesis is a fractured family—what we would call a “dysfunctional” family?” (Moyers, (ed.), 1996, pp. 26–28).

In other words, despite the pristine personalities that had been bestowed on these figures by well-meaning adults during my upbringing, I realized that most of the prominent figures in Genesis are actually portrayed as having had major character flaws. They were indeed far from the noble examples of faith I had heard about in my childhood and that I had somehow continued to envision even through numerous years of religious and theological training.

When read at face value, the Genesis record could not be clearer that most of those I had grown up hearing referred to as heroes of the faith were, in fact, people who truly knew how to really screw things up. For the first time in my life, I began to comprehend that fellows like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob could well have spent their fair share of time in the principal’s office for behaviour unbecom-

ing. I saw, with no small satisfaction, that they could easily have received as many detentions in high school as I had earned. These guys were self-seekers, par excellent. They each had an ample personal inventory of rough edges and serious shortcomings in their lives.

Character flaws? Stumbling blocks? Progress yet to be made in their spiritual development? For sure, the evidence is abundant! And it is right there in plain view in the pages of Genesis for their spiritual posterity to review in all of its arresting candour and brazen faithlessness.

How had I missed such even as an adult—a theologically trained adult at that?

It registered with me that winter as never before that when you read these stories for what the text actually reveals without allowing anyone else to contextualize them for you, many of the revered figures in Genesis are not very nice people at all. Frankly, I am not certain I would have been comfortable living next door to some of them. Nor would I have considered leaving my kids in their care or getting involved in a business transaction with people of their ilk.

Karen Armstrong augments the point very well when she writes:

“In this story of God’s chosen family, we find very few of the “family values” that Jews, Christians, and Muslims, who all in their different ways claim to be children of Abraham, avow as crucial to the religious life. Abraham’s household was a troubled one; in no way did it replicate the lost harmony of Eden.”
(Armstrong, 1996, pp. 64–65)

Two incidents from my everyday world came together that winter to open my spiritual eyes to these Bible heroes as I had never before considered them. Such myopia was largely owing to the fact that, as I have indicated, my childhood and much of my vocational training occurred within the fundagelical orbit. As honest students of any particular interpretation of Christianity (insert the appropriate adjective for your brand) should acknowledge, all traditional

interpretations of the Christian faith come with their fair share of cultural, historical, exegetical, hermeneutical and denominational baggage.

It was in the mid-1990s, then, that I read about a series of upcoming Public Broadcasting System television programs to be hosted by respected American journalist, Bill Moyers. Since I was familiar with and appreciative of Moyers' work, I made plans to record the conversations that were proposed featuring a panel of academic and religious experts as they related to the curious realities conveyed in the narratives found in Genesis. I read the relevant passages from Genesis beforehand that were scheduled to be discussed in each weekly program. I later acquired the book *Genesis: A Living Conversation* (a companion to the public television series) edited by Moyers and published thereafter that contained the transcripts of those interactions (Moyers, (Ed.), 1996).

Bill Moyers and his diverse roster of well qualified guests capably documented that the first book of the Bible graphically informs us that most of the key figures in the early pages of the book revered by Christians were people with major—indeed, jaw-dropping—character flaws. They were consistently self-seeking, dishonest, cunning, dysfunctional, vengeful, immoral, and untrustworthy, to name but a few of their individual and collective fortes. Many of them were more qualified for what some people today might call a “shyster” than for inclusion among God’s chosen people. (I make no apology whatsoever and, and am indeed delighted to report especially for the benefit of my legal and political friends, that an old online *Encarta* dictionary I consulted for a fine tuning of the term “shyster” states: “an unscrupulous person, especially a lawyer and a political representative.” Nailed it! So, to those of my acquaintances for whom such a designation is relevant, would you please deal with the matter in question? Thank you!).

Contrary to the messages many of us absorbed as children about the ancient figures of the Bible being iconic examples of great faith, then, there are glaring elements in their lives that indicate they were

not “winners” at all. They were better qualified as “losers,” those well deserving of being on the receiving end of the modern expressions by which we often communicate perplexity: “Really!?” “Seriously!?” or “Are you kidding me!?”

Any parent who has ever been tempted to give up on their own child(ren) achieving a commendable level of spiritual maturity ought to derive significant comfort and encouragement from what the book of Genesis reveals concerning God’s experiences in coping with the antics of some of his “kids.” Here we find them, portrayed for billions of readers over the numerous centuries to encounter, sitting atop their pile of dirty laundry directly in front of the skeletons in their closets.

The honour roll

At around the same time I was tuning in to Bill Moyers and his team’s intriguing discussions on PBS, the current issue of *Maclean’s*, Canada’s weekly newsmagazine, arrived in the mail. *Maclean’s* was published for decades in Canada and covered the nation’s political and cultural life. In 2016, like many other print media publications in the internet era, it changed its primary identity to an online publication although it continues to publish a monthly paper edition.

Maclean’s at that time would publish an Honour Roll every January in which it identified a number of Canadians who had figured prominently in the nation’s news the previous calendar year. In addition to some of the predictable personalities that all such lists contain—sports figures, entertainers, politicians—profile was also given to a number of rank and file Canadians considered to have made particularly positive contributions to their communities during the preceding year.

As I read through the *Maclean’s* cover story one evening prior to tuning in the Moyers TV series, I found myself wondering if anyone had ever considered publishing—not an Honour Roll of

Winners, but an Honour Roll of Losers. Or, instead of an Honour Roll, a Dishonour Roll. You know, formally publicize a list of citizens who had really botched it during the past year—Canadians who had resoundingly messed up—so the entire nation could read and recall.

Now, apart from the fact that I come from a healthy lineage of jokers, why would I ponder the merits of publishing an Honour Roll for Losers?

Short answer: blame the Bible or Genesis. Do not fault Bill Moyers or his contingent of competent scholars. They did not write the material they were analyzing. Regardless of your view of matters related to the inspiration and authority of Scripture—maybe blame the Holy Spirit or Moses. Perhaps blame JEPD. (JEPD is the abbreviation for a component of critical scholarship that posits the first five books of The Old Testament as the work of several writers/editors as opposed to the traditional view of fundagelicals that Genesis represents the work of a single author, likely Moses).

I really do not care what decision you make in this regard except to say that if you are inclined to view the Bible as any kind of a reliable guide for how to live in the modern era, recognize your obligation to come to terms with the tabloid quality news stories dispensed in the opening chapters of what is often referred to as “The Good Book.”

Because I again submit to you that for many of us—perhaps for most of us—such sordid details as we find in Genesis might best be received as a unique kind of comfort and affirmation. They should enter our field of spiritual vision as good news and as welcome relief. We are not alone in our persistent spiritual dysfunctions! In fact, we are in fairly reputable company with respect to succumbing to spiritual breakdown.

“Hallelujah,” I can hear some of you saying. “You mean to tell me that I am not the first ridiculously inconsistent joker that God has had to put up with?” Or “are you suggesting there are people in

the Bible who believed one thing and lived another, people whose behaviour did not live up to their theology?"

Yes, I am indeed positing precisely that scenario.

An anecdote from a recent newspaper story regarding congregational life at one church in British Columbia underscores the point I wish to make here. One Sunday morning, Pastor Jeff Germo invited parishioners to take out their smartphones during a worship service and interact with him electronically via a communications technology developed in Sweden:

At the church auditorium in Campbell River, Mr. Germo started his sermon by asking parishioners to take out their smartphones and tablets, click on a Mentimeter link and punch in a code.

Moments later, an e-mail arrived asking parishioners if they have ever failed terribly.

Just 2 per cent replied: "No, I'm a winner."

Mr. Germo expressed amazement that any member of the congregation said they had never experienced failure.

"If you are more than a year old, you probably have failed at something," Mr. Germo said as a man at the back of the auditorium of about 250 people raised his hand to acknowledge he chose the 'no failure' answer.

"That's beautiful. That's delusional," Mr. Germo jokes.

But as the sermon continued, large display screens showed the majority of the survey participants replied they have experienced failure and are trying to get over it. (Meisnner, 2018)

Indeed! This excerpt is precisely in line with the reality of what is seen when we read the Biblical text for what it clearly states. To see ourselves in the failures of those heroes of faith whom God

used, blessed and graced despite their penchant to seriously mess up, is essential to acquiring the hope that arises from a meaningful grasp of the essence of divine grace.

This, then, is what I have in mind when I talk in terms of truly comprehending that pursuing a life of faith is really not about me or us. It is actually about Something and Someone far more significant than either you or me.

And, for this fact, we ought to individually and collectively offer deep gratitude.

Welcome to the 21st century

The insights into the less than stellar behaviours of the characters of Genesis that the Moyers panel and book presented combined with my musings regarding the *Maclean's* honour roll were augmented by yet another engaging influence I encountered along this line shortly into the twenty-first century. That was when I first read *Genesis for Normal People: A Guide to the Most Controversial, Misunderstood, and Abused Book of the Bible* co-authored by Peter Enns and Jared Byas and published in 2012. Their suggestions regarding the authorship and the time when the writing of The Pentateuch was finalized resonated with my own efforts to fit the stories to be visited in this book into the broader narrative of the Old Testament as a whole.

I am accordingly grateful for their insightful scholarship as evidenced by my use of a few lengthy quotations from their work:

...[T]he Pentateuch *as we know it* didn't come together until sometime after 539 B.C. (about 700–1000 years after the period of Moses). This is a significant year for Jews. The year 539 B.C. is when the Persian King Cyrus defeated the Babylonians, thus releasing the Israelites who had been captives of Babylon since 586 B.C.

When we say the Pentateuch “as we know it” came together sometime after 539 B.C., we do not mean to say it was written from scratch during that time. There were certainly older writings and oral traditions that had been around for hundreds of years. But it was sometime after the Israelites returned to their homeland that all of these older writings and oral traditions were compiled and edited in the way we now have them in our Bible. So rather than viewing the Pentateuch as a song written by one artist at one time, it should be seen as a remix that takes samples of other work and puts them together in a fresh way to tell a single story. This goes for Genesis too.

Why would anyone come to this conclusion? Because there are clues in Genesis that point you in this direction, some of which have been noted by Jewish and Christian readers for hundreds of years.

For example, in the Abraham story (Genesis 12:6 and 13:7) we read that the Canaanites were living in the land “then” or “at that time.” If the Canaanites were living in the land “then,” it makes sense that the writer is writing at a time when the Canaanites were *not* in the land. And according to the biblical story, it wasn’t until the days of Kings David and Solomon that the Canaanites were driven out, which was sometime after 1000 B.C. So here we have a clue that at least that part of Genesis comes from sometime after 1000 B.C., although it is telling us a story set in Abraham’s day (about 2100 B.C., as the Bible presents it). (pp. 7–8) (emphasis original)

Against this informative background, Enns and Byas continue:

Writing Israel’s story probably started around the time of King David, but it went into hyperspeed when the Israelites went through the trauma of the exile as they were taken out of their country and into Babylon in the sixth century B.C. Why would that make them write more? The Israelites believed God

had promised, ages earlier, to give them the land of Canaan to be theirs forever. He also promised that they would have a line of kings descended from King David who would reign from Jerusalem forever. (You can read about this in 2 Samuel 7.) But Israel (especially the kings) had blown God off for so long that, as the story goes, God gave them over to their enemies, the Babylonians—who had recently become the superpower.

The Babylonians marched into Jerusalem and by 586 B.C. had bulldozed the Temple, God’s sacred house, and taken much of the population captive. So in 586 B.C. Israel looked around. No king. No land. No Temple. Who is Israel without a king, without a land, and without the Temple? It looked like God had broken his promise and abandoned his own people.

It’s not hard to imagine, then, why the Israelites at this time did some soul searching. They looked back at their ancient past to make sense of the tragedy of their recent history. “In view of all that happened, are we still God’s people? Does he still care for us? How can we make sure that this doesn’t happen to us again? Will we ever regain the glory of our past? To address these very real and pressing questions, they began retelling their story—one last time. That last telling became what Christians call the Old Testament.

Think of the Old Testament as Israel’s story, written in light of national trauma, to encourage continued faithfulness to God.

... The Pentateuch is Israel’s constitution. “This is who we are, this is where we have come from, this is what we believe—and most importantly, this is what our God is like. He has always been faithful to us in the past, no matter how badly we screwed up. But he also commands us to be faithful. Let’s make

sure we remember all of this so we aren't carried off by another nation ever again.”

... We have spent this chapter saying something rather simple: you cannot properly understand Genesis without seeing it first in *its* context, not ours. Genesis not only begins the story of Israel and should be read in conversation with the rest of that story, but it is also a story that is told through the eyes of an ancient people in national crisis.” (pp. 8–11) (emphasis original)

As Enns and Byas helpfully confirm, much of the Old Testament amounts to a story of Israel's struggle with God and with becoming the people of God that he desired them to become. It is most fitting, therefore, that the book of Genesis contains several accounts regarding how desperately even the founding fathers (and mothers) of the people of God struggled in terms of their own faith. Stated succinctly, they come across to modern readers of Genesis as bumbling losers whose faith was not very exemplary at all. To cite Enns and Byas in this regard:

If you need more convincing that struggling is a big issue in Genesis, look at Jacob. He literally wrestles with God and his new name, “Israel,” means “one who struggles with God.” This is exactly what we would expect from a story written by exiled Israelites who are struggling with their current conditions, and ultimately, their very identity.” (p. 17)

Seeing the good news in bad news

Having been a pastor for more than three decades, I have encountered hundreds of people who have long since wearied of being consistently obstructed and ultimately defeated in their faith journey by their annoying personal character flaws, bad habits and conscious sins. They have often come to visit me when they are spiritually exhausted by persistent character weaknesses that have

sabotaged their self respect, their earnest efforts and their spiritual vitality.

They tell me that their attempts to practice some kind of a meaningful life of faith have become useless to the point where they believe they are merely going through the motion of devotion. They are doing the best they can to maintain a semblance of orthodox faith in order to please their spouse and Christian friends (or their pastor), to set a good example for their kids or to preserve a carefully groomed reputation of being somewhat devout. Deep down, however, they are convinced that those “besetting sins,” to reference the King James Version in Hebrews 12:1, have prompted God to give up on their ever being of any use to his Church or to his sovereign purposes.

If you can especially relate to such sentiments, trust me when I suggest that your experience is not as unusual as you may think it is or have been led to believe it is. Pursuing a life of faith in the twenty-first century requires painstaking, sustained and disciplined effort. It demands a tenacity that is fraught with frequent failure. It involves starting over again, time after time.

I know this because the Bible tells me so. So does my own experience together with that of scores of delightful men and women who over the years have been honest enough to confide in me their frustrations along this line.

I therefore cannot declare it strongly enough throughout this volume, for it needs to be trumpeted as revitalizing and regenerating news to all of us: **GOD IS LOSER FRIENDLY!** Or, to put it another way and thereby reconnect with Rick Warren’s assertion: “It’s not about you!”

For far too long now, too many of us for reasons related to our upbringing or otherwise, have engaged the life of faith as if it really is all about us. We have grown used to struggling along as best we can in our earnest efforts to attain our noblest objectives. Such an approach to the life of God-awareness is built on a false notion coloured by the inevitable influences of the culture in which we

function. The essence of grace is otherwise for, as we will see, it is both counter-cultural and counter-intuitive.

That grace is “not of yourselves, so that no one can boast” is not a notion that began or made its debut with St. Paul in Ephesians 2:8, 9. It’s a truth that God sets forth time and time again in the opening chapters of the first book in the Bible, Genesis. It may help you to think of it this way: grace tenaciously declared its arrival at the very beginning of time and is instructively recorded from the very outset of the Christian Scriptures.

Grace, then, is all about him or her, whatever pronoun for the Almighty best resonates with you. Yes, God has been rolling his or her eyes over the behaviour of well-intentioned people like you and me for millennia now. As you will see repeatedly throughout this work, I keep having this mental image of the Deity clapping himself or herself on the forehead and doing their best “Doh!” impression concerning the behaviour of their alleged loyalists. In truth, such has been the case since long before that esteemed professor of practical theology, Homer Simpson, ever introduced that term into contemporary conversation.