

FINDING GOD IN THE DARK

FAITH, DISAPPOINTMENT, AND THE STRUGGLE TO BELIEVE

TED KLUCK AND RONNIE MARTIN



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For Kristin, who has forgiven much.

For everybody who hurts.

For Beth, and the hope that lies within.

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From Ted

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To my wife, Melissa, and daughter, Beth—my two favorite people in the whole world.

Author's Note

Everybody Hurts

TED KLUCK

I've always hated the song "Everybody Hurts" by R.E.M. As a band, they always struck me as overly whiny and weaselly. R.E.M. was the guy in the perfect thrift-store ironic T-shirt, trying to find himself. Or the girl at the bookstore who was trying too hard to look casual. I'm from the middle of a cornfield (Hartford City, Indiana), and singing about how "everybody hurts" just seems soft, self-indulgent, and pointless.

But the thing is, everybody does hurt. Life (thirty-six years and counting) has shown me this. I've felt pain caused by others and, what's worse, my own sin has *caused* mental, physical, and emotional pain in others. Everybody hurts, and sometimes because of me. And in the church we sometimes expect people to just shrug and say, "Well, it's all part of God's plan," which isn't necessarily untrue, but it's a response that strikes me as a little inhuman and, if Scripture is to be believed, *unspiritual*. Job rent his garments and screamed, and

the Bible said he was without sin in that particular situation. Jesus sweat blood in the garden. He didn't just skip to the cross saying, "Hey, I know how this is going to work out, so it's all good." Pain is real, and it's not necessarily unspiritual to acknowledge it. This book, in part, is an acknowledgment of pain and a reflection on what to do with it. My chapters are narrative in nature. By the ripe old(ish) age of thirty-six, one of the things I've learned about myself is that this, for better or worse, is how I write. This is a book about finding God in the dark. My chapters, in particular, will tell the stories of my "dark"—losing an adoption; experiencing professional failure; and then ultimately, by a movement of the Holy Spirit, confronting my own dark, sinful heart. Now, looking back, I am filled with thankfulness for these events because they are the events that God ordained for me to bring me into closer, deeper communion with Him. But in the midst of them, there was great pain.

Still, a temptation in reading a book like this, and narratives like these, would be to say, "Yeah, but Kluck hasn't gone through _____. He hasn't gone through what *I'm* going through." I know this will be a temptation because I've said similar things myself about stories that belonged to other people. "Yeah, but . . ."

I fully and openly acknowledge that there are many people who have gone through things that are much harder than the things I describe on these pages. But what's worth acknowledging, I think, is that these are the circumstances that God put *me* through in a particular time, and a particular place, for a particular purpose (my good and His glory). I've tried to re-create them as accurately as possible, even though the process was, at times, more than a little painful. If you're in Christ, you can trust that God is doing, and will do, the same for you in your circumstances. I've also tried to include

Author's Note

Scripture that's practical and relatable—the kinds of Scriptures you can pray through when you can't seem to find the words or energy to pray on your own.

One of the things I've always struggled with in life is listening to spiritual input from anyone whom I hadn't perceived as having gone through “deep waters.” My hope and prayer for this book is that by reading about my deep waters, you can love and trust God more through yours.

Humbly, in Christ,
Ted Kluck

Introduction

RONNIE MARTIN

It's early on a Saturday morning as I sit down to write this intro, which I've decided to do in the somewhat cold, lifeless confines of my recording studio. I say lifeless because I'm surrounded by sparse birchwood walls, a gunmetal gray door, some strategically placed track lighting, and absolutely no windows. A vast array of knobs, switches, and meters that resemble an old laboratory from a science fiction movie in the 1960s are my only companions. For recording the kind of music I do, it's a perfectly designed space. There's no outside noise, outside light, or outside distraction coming in. Nobody else has any access unless I unlock the door and let them in. For all intents and purposes, I exist in total isolation when I'm in my studio, without any influence whatsoever from the outside world.

I think this may be an apt picture of how it feels when questions of faith, doubt, and unbelief come pressing into our hearts and minds. We feel detached, isolated, and alone. We feel neglected and wonder if God remembers that we're still His children. Sometimes we question whether He even exists at all.

Most of us don't need an introduction to any of these questions. As Tom Cruise once remarked in his Oscar-nominated role in *Jerry Maguire*, "We live in a cynical world. A cynical, cynical world."

He wasn't wrong.

The roots of doubt and unbelief are buried deep within the soil of our culture. From the first time the devil asked the question "Did God really say . . .?" to Eve in the garden, what he really did was call Eve to cynically question the love, goodness, trustworthiness, and reliability of God. To question His sovereignty. As we find ourselves mired in doubt and unbelief, we're simply grasping for an answer to the same question: "Did God really say . . . ?"

What Ted and I hope to do is explore the heart of this crucial question, a question that puts the goodness of God and the intent of His heart to the test. We'll do it by sharing with you some of the ordinary, everyday stories that make up the majority of our day-to-day lives. We realize that most of us don't face earth-shattering, death-defying moments that propel us headlong into severe doubts over God's goodness on a daily basis. For many of us, doubt and unbelief can be subtle poisons that gradually inoculate us over time from seeing the evidence of God's grace working steadily in our families, jobs, relationships, and futures. It's only when we begin to see, understand, and believe that God is truly at work in the fabric of every intricate detail of our lives that the dim light of doubt and unbelief gives way to the bright light of hope in Him.

Light dawns in the darkness for the upright; he is gracious,
merciful and upright.

Psalm 112:4

It's after we find God in the dark that we realize He was already there.

1

You Gotta Have Faith

*The Source of Unbelief
(or the Struggle to Believe
When Life's Falling Apart)*

TED KLUCK

Gotta make it to heaven, for going through hell.

—50 Cent, “Gotta Make It to Heaven”

Cast all your anxieties on him because he cares
for you.

—1 Peter 5:7 NIV

Hell hath no fury like a Ukrainian hallway.

Ukrainian hallways are dark and cold, strewn with trash,
and smelling like some combination of urine, fried food, and
garbage. A clichéd single lightbulb socket is either populated

by a broken lightbulb, or is hanging empty (likely stolen by one of the tenants).

These observances were all swirling in my mind as I crawled on my hands and knees back into my tiny apartment after a mild electrocution at the electrical box in the hallway—a box whose wires hadn't been looked at or manipulated since Stalin. My wife was crying. This was week one of a six-week stay in Ukraine. It was going to be a long stay.

When adopting in Ukraine, you are often told some pretty sketchy things that you just have to trust. Like you're told to be down on the street corner in five minutes to meet your ride, or you're told to strap twenty-large in cash around your waist—out of which you will be paying drivers, bribes, office workers, and all manner of people who will be converting and spending your American dollars. It's like being in a movie written by somebody else but starring you. Adopting abroad is an exercise in faith—in the people facilitating, the process, and God's sovereign plan.

My wife and I were in Kiev working on adopting the little boy who would become our second son, Maximilian Dmitri Kluck. Sometime during the first week we were told that Maxim had a sister named Anastasia, and that we could fill out paperwork that would allow us to come back a year later and adopt her too. We didn't know how we would fund the venture, but we said yes and cried tears of joy for the daughter we'd always hoped and prayed for that the Lord seemed to be providing.

Driving to the orphanage each day to see Maxim was an adventure in nausea control. Our driver, Vadim, had a penchant for stepping on and off the gas pedal often. This, coupled with big-city air pollution (Kiev—about the size of Chicago population-wise, but way less clean), made us sick to our stomachs nearly every day. Still, we saw so much on

those drives. We visited a courthouse that was painted the exact same shade of pink as Pepto-Bismol. We saw beautiful centuries-old buildings stacked right next to newish depressing, concrete Soviet-era apartment buildings that looked like parking garages. The latter was the kind of building we called “home.” I would stand at the window smoking cigarettes each night (hey, they were fifty cents a pack—it made good economic sense) and watch rats run out from beneath the building. That’s entertainment!

The orphanage was a drab civic-ish building¹ located in an outlying town called Boyarka. Each day we walked into a dark (either all of the lightbulbs were burned out, or they were intentionally turned off to save money) room that featured a desk (always empty) and a really sad-looking² pile of plastic kids’ toys. We would just stand there stupidly until someone came out to help us, because there were certain (read: most) areas of the orphanage into which we were forbidden to go. There were apparently things happening that they didn’t want us to see.

One morning they brought her to us, but only for a moment.

Anastasia looked like Cindy Lou Who from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. She was tiny, two years old, blonde, and had little sloppy-yet-adorable pigtails. She had just been woken from a nap and was crying, but we had a moment to bond with her and take a picture. A picture that we would look at and pray over in the months to come. We were assured that the papers we filled out would make her ours, and we left Ukraine a month later (and many thousands of dollars lighter) with sweet Maxim Dmitri, and with the dream of returning in a year for his sister.

1. Think of the most depressing civic building you can imagine in America (like a Department of Motor Vehicles office), and then go a few steps worse.

2. Like the kind you see leftover at the end of garage sales.

Boulevard of Broken Dreams

The intervening months brought a lot of change. It was an adjustment to get used to two little boys in our house, as six years prior we had adopted Tristan Volodymyr Kluck, now eight, from another city in Ukraine. Tristan was strong as an ox—big, fast, outgoing, and aggressive. His brother, Maxim, was tiny, skinny, quiet, and malnourished, but as sweet as a little lamb. The two were quite a pair, and were soon thick as thieves. Tristan would do anything for his little brother.

All the while we guarded our hearts, knowing the craziness that was Ukrainian bureaucracy. But as the months went by, we slowly let our guard down. We began the herculean task of paperwork and fund-raising for Anastasia's adoption. We had a huge mom-to-mom sale at our church, and a big fund-raising night called Kluckstock, which featured a silent auction, a dessert buffet (prepared by my talented wife), and karaoke.³ There was a lot of joy in the air. Fear of the unknown (and financial anxiety), but also pure joy. The Lord seemed to be moving mountains as our church rallied to bring this little girl into our home—a home where she would hear the gospel and be lovingly welcomed into a thriving local church. It seemed, to us, to be all good.

Then we got the call.

There's always a call. It came from the lady who had taken over the Ukraine program at our stateside adoption agency, and it was a lady who, honestly, neither Kristin nor I were crazy for. She was short and brusque which, ironically, made her a lot like a Ukrainian woman. Except that she was an American.

She dispassionately told us that due to a “change in some legislation”⁴ in Ukraine, Anastasia was being adopted by a

3. Featuring yours truly belting out such hits as “Working for the Weekend” by Loverboy and “I Don't Wanna Miss a Thing” by Aerosmith.

4. This is shorthand for a bribe by a family with deeper pockets than ours.

Ukrainian family. We had, that very morning, started hanging girls' clothes in the closet of the room that would have been hers. We were already preparing to go back to Ukraine in a few months to get her. My wife sobbed angry tears and I tried to comfort her as well as I could . . . but words were no comfort.

Our contact at the adoption agency said that there was “nothing we can do,” even as we tried advocating through lobbyists and politicians. Finally I penned an impassioned letter to the adoptive family. It may or may not have been the right thing to do:

Dear Family Adopting the Biological Sister of Our Adopted Son,

Forgive me for not knowing your names. To us you're just the subject of a very depressing phone call from our caseworker at Bethany Christian Services. To us you're just the couple who are negating the legal documents we signed last year in Ukraine during the adoption of Maximilian (our son), stating that we would be able to come back in a year and adopt Anastasia (his biological sister).

My name is Ted and my wife's name is Kristin. We've adopted two boys from Ukraine, ages seven and four. We're a very average American family—I write books and teach college English classes, and my wife works in the home raising these two energetic boys, whom we love dearly. Oddly, though, we have some things in common with you. We've both been to the selfsame orphanage in Boyarka, on the outskirts of Kiev, and have both fallen in love with the same vulnerable little girl there. We spent weeks in that orphanage—in the dark lobby, the even darker playroom, and the little playground out back, getting to know our sweet Maxim, and learning that he had a sister in the very

same orphanage. One day they let us meet her and take her picture, and asked us to sign documents stating that we would indeed be adopting her. Documents that, they assured us, would protect us from this very situation.

We looked at that picture of her and prayed over it for the last year.

According to the depressing phone call we recently received, several families, like you, had expressed interest in her, but the orphanage rightly explained that there was an American couple (us) in line to adopt her once she was officially on the registry. But you persisted enough to have signed some other paperwork that has rendered our paperwork null and void. Let me say that I don't blame you for falling in love with her. If she's anything like her brother, she is happy, kind, quick to smile, and slow to anger.

What you are doing is not illegal, apparently, but still feels unspeakably mean.

Let me share a quick story. Knowing how things work in international adoptions (at times completely unpredictable and subject to change on a whim), we had a feeling something like this might happen. So we guarded our hearts against it for several months. But recently my wife decided to start hanging girls' clothes in the closet in our extra bedroom. We had gotten close enough to the adoption to allow ourselves to begin to hope and to stop guarding our hearts.

Let me close by asking you a question: Is this really how you want to enter into a lifelong relationship with this child, knowing that you broke the hearts of another family and separated her from her biological brother? Our hearts will heal eventually. We trust and love and believe in a sovereign God who gives and takes away. But still, this sucks.

I would love for you to look me in the eye and tell me, in person,⁵ all of the reasons why it's necessary, in an entire country full of orphans, for you to adopt the girl we've been hoping and praying for as our daughter.

Let me be the first to acknowledge the fact that we don't expect this letter to do anything. I'll be shocked if it ever reaches you, but in a weird way I feel better for having written it. If you've gotten to this point in the process, you may very well not be the kind of people who would be moved by a letter like this. But please know that there are real people on the other end of this process. If I were a better Christian, I would say that I forgive you and I'm praying for you. But I don't think I have, and I'm not. But I am praying for your daughter.

*Sincerely,
Ted and Kristin Kluck*

The letter did nothing. And neither did our prayers that God would work a miracle in the situation and unite Anastasia with her brother. The result was heartache, pain, depression, doubt, cynicism, and *unbelief*.

Help My Unbelief

In my life the core trigger for unbelief and cynicism has been broken dreams and unmet expectations of which I have had many, but probably no more than the average person. There have been book deals that have fallen through,⁶ a semi-promising football career lost to injury, broken promises from Christians, and just plain old disappointment at wanting

5. What I really wanted was to show this guy an up-close view of my fist.

6. Too many to recount.

something desperately and not being able to have it. This is part of the human condition. It's the part that makes you cynical. It's the part that makes you just want to black out and fall asleep for a long, long time.

It has been those scenarios, like Anastasia, in which God shows us something that on the surface looks so airtight and amazing it *has* to be from Him. This is at least what we tell ourselves as we try to understand God's sovereign will. To see it taken away is, quite simply, heartbreaking. It brings with it anger, grief, and a loss of hope.

My tendency in the wake of Anastasia was to expect bad things to happen. To ask God if He put me on this earth just so that He could give me a beating. I stopped believing in His sovereign plan and started feeling like a punching bag. My human reaction was to become cynical and wary.

The father with the sick, demon-possessed child in Mark 9 must have felt the same way. Being a father in those days probably wasn't a whole lot different from being a father now. You love your child in a desperate, gut-level way. A take-a-bullet-for-this-person kind of way. Imagine your child is sick—possessed by an evil spirit, the text tells us—and you've tried everything to help him. People are looking at you funny because you've got a weird kid. "What did he do to deserve that?" they mutter under their breath, all the while wishing you well in public. The condition takes its toll on your home, your marriage, and your ability to think, eat, and sleep normally. You enter survival mode—completing only those tasks that are essential for life—and live joylessly from day to day. Fatherhood is tough anyway, but it's harder when you're taking an emotional beating from life and circumstances. You have trouble believing and hoping.

So the man in Mark 9 says, "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything

is possible for one who believes.” “I believe,” the man said. “Help me overcome my unbelief.”⁷

This is an example of a struggling, weary, beaten, and scarred—but still viable—faith. A faith that’s on the ropes but still standing. It’s an example of how to believe in the face of great trial. The man not only trusts Jesus with his child, but with his unbelief as well. He is casting all his anxieties on Him, who cares for him.

In the wake of Anastasia, I was wracked with anxieties. Financial anxiety over the money we’d lost in the adoption, professional anxiety, and most of all personal anxiety over my inability to feel love for a Lord who would take this away from us. My wife was hurting as well. She was retreating from the women at church, and she even had a hard time talking to me about what she was experiencing. Infertility and a failed adoption were shaking her faith to the core.

I knew in my head that God was real, and I even believed that He loved me. I just wanted, and needed, to feel it. I remember a road trip we took following Anastasia’s loss. We were so frustrated—tapped out mentally, physically, and financially—that we were both in tears. I was trying to personally carry and deal with all of my anxieties, and was failing miserably. I was being driven to my knees, again, by a God who loved me and cared for me. At the time I questioned two essential biblical truths—that God was good, and that He loved me. I was refusing to cast my anxieties on Him, because I struggled to fully trust Him not to hurt me again. I believed in His sovereignty. . . . I believed that He had ordained Anastasia’s loss, and that it wasn’t the Enemy, as some would suggest. I believe that God is ruler of all, even the Enemy. Though, to be honest, it would have been easier to be mad at the devil. I think being mad at God,

7. Mark 9:22–24

in the absence of hope and trust, is the darkest, loneliest place of all.

I still believed, but I needed help in my unbelief. I needed to cast my anxieties on Him, who cared for me. Scripture had given me a framework for praying through my unbelief, but I was refusing to see it and use it. David, the psalmist, sums up this framework perfectly in Psalm 13—a dark and tormented, but ultimately hopeful, picture of believing through suffering:

How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, LORD my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the LORD’s praise,
for he has been good to me. (NIV)

It rained and we drove and cried. Music didn’t sound good. Food didn’t taste good. The world seemed dark and bleak. Life seemed a series of disappointments, peppered with occasional rays of hope. I silently hoped that my wife still loved me in the midst of all this failure, but I think I also wouldn’t have blamed her if she didn’t.