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## Knowing We Don't Know (Chapter One of When Faith Fails)

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Chapter 1

# Knowing We Don't Know

*Below the surface, we do not know; we shall never  
know why; we shall never know tomorrow . . .  
this mysterious wall round our world and our  
perception of it is not there to frustrate us but to  
train us back to the now, to life, to our time being.*

—JOHN FOWLES, *THE ARISTOS*

*Blessed are the curious . . . for they  
shall have adventures.*

—LOVELLE DRACHMAN

THE FIRST STEP INTO something new often looks like trust, not clarity.

I began to discover the meaning of those words when I packed up everything I owned and moved from Oregon to the jungles of Vanuatu. Never heard of it? Neither had I when my pastor invited me to go. “It will be great,” he said. “You’ll be teaching a group of college-aged students who come from all over the country to learn.” Impulsive, in my early twenties, and evidently ready for

adventure, I said yes, then hurried to the store to pick up a map. I spent forty-five minutes searching for Vanuatu. Assuming it was in Africa, my eyes scoured the continent. Finally, I realized Vanuatu is nowhere near Africa. It's a group of eighty-two islands in the South Pacific, about 750 miles from Fiji. Still totally clueless, I said my goodbyes and got on a plane, about to begin one of the most exciting and unforgettable seasons of my life.

Weeks later, I sat around a fire with a group of new friends. "Dominic," my friend Vera asked, "tell us something about America. What's an area you love to visit?"

Several places immediately came to mind: the beach, Crater Lake, my favorite coffee shop I especially missed after months away. "I know," I said suddenly, "Disneyland!" The moment I said it, though, I felt a stab of regret. I was in *way* over my head.

Vanuatu is among the most primitive nations on earth. If you ever have the chance to visit, it's like stepping into an issue of *National Geographic*. We lived in huts. No electricity. No running water. I had to learn a new language called Bislama. Bislama is an English-based creole language that is extremely simple and descriptive. For example, the word *slingshot* (which they use for hunting) is *elastic blong shootem pijin*. The word *piano* is even more flamboyant. Rather than using the single word *piano*, you would say something like "Hemi wan box, wea got white teeth blong hem, mo got black teeth blong hem. Mo, suppose yu kilim teeth blong hem, hemi sing out long yu."

That's the word *piano*.

You can imagine the horror I felt when I was teaching theology and came across the word *propitiation*. And you can imagine the horror I was about to feel when asked about the Happiest Place on Earth.

"What's Disneyland?" a student asked.

"Well . . ." *Where do I even begin?* I wondered. So, I started with Mickey Mouse. "There's a giant mouse named Mickey, who lives in a part of America called California." The only problem was, there is no word for mouse in their language. The closest they had was the word *rat*. I started over. "There's a giant rat that lives in America . . . and he's big. Really big." (In Bislama, you say "big-fala.")

They nodded their heads. They had all seen their fair share of rodents of unusual size. Vanuatu was full of them.

"What's amazing about this rat," I continued, "is that he can talk."

Their eyes widened.

"Well, not really the rat . . . there's someone inside the rat."

They stared at me. "So . . . he eats people?" someone whispered.

"No, of course not. The person is alive. He makes the rat move."

"But . . . why?"

I was getting nowhere fast.

I switched gears and began telling them about the castle. But again, there is no word for castle in Bislama. The closest they had was *hut*.

"So . . ." I quickly continued, "there's a big-fala rat, and he lives inside a big-fala hut." I tried to describe the hut. The dimensions were bigger than anything they could envision. I could see the confusion etched on their faces. A hundred feet tall? Spires? The rat lives there? Why? And why would anyone want to visit? *What is this place?*

The confusion was rapidly growing. They murmured anxiously to one another.

I moved on to the teacups. "There are these big-fala cups!" I exclaimed. "You sit in them, and you spin around and around!"

They grew silent. At this point their minds were spinning like the cups.

Finally, one of them spoke up. It was Vera. "Dominic," he cautioned. "You must *never* go to Disneyland. It is an evil place."

The other students nodded passionately as he spoke.

"And Mickey," he continued. "Mickey is a witch doctor."

I laughed. They didn't. I changed the subject and asked them about fishing.

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I'll never forget that conversation around the fire.

There I was, relatively new to the Vanuatu culture. Trying to learn their language. Trying to eat their food (that's another story!). Trying to understand how they thought, what they believed, and how they did life. I knew so little. And what I clumsily explained was so foreign. So abstract. So bizarre.

I tried to put into words what I experienced to be real but quickly encountered the cultural chasm between us. There are some things that, unless you've been there and seen it yourself, cannot be brought to life with words alone. And this is true not only on an island in the South Pacific, sitting around a fire with a group of bewildered students. It's true of all of us, no matter where you live.

Our knowledge is opaque. Our perspective confined. We may deliberate, speculate, guess, and argue—but there are some things beyond our grasp.

To some, Disneyland is the Happiest Place on Earth. To others, it's controlled by an evil mastermind/witch doctor named Mickey.

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We live in a world of limitations.

There are limits, as I learned, to language, culture, and our view of the world. There are also limits to our intellect; no matter how much we read, research, or study, we still need Alexa or Siri to close the gaps. There are limits to our physical strength; even if we do CrossFit, yoga, and consume endless spinach smoothies, inevitably we'll come down with the flu. And there are limits to our lifetime. According to James 4:14, life is "a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." Snap your fingers and you're more raisin than grape. Life is short.

To be human is to encounter limitation in all its forms. There is so much we cannot do and so much we cannot know. Socrates admitted, "We do not know—neither the sophists, nor the orators, nor the artists, nor I—what the True, the Good, and the Beautiful is . . . I am strongly convinced that I am ignorant of what I do not know."<sup>1</sup> So not only do we live in a world of limits, but we are ignorant of what those limits are. We don't know what we don't know.

And to make matters worse, even those areas of life we are confident in are still prone to uncertainty. For example, I may believe that a friend genuinely loves me. I may even have evidence backing up that belief, but can I be 100 percent confident this is true? What if they're merely using me to get something they want? What if their "love" is a two-faced mask? Sometimes the most cherished beliefs we hold may turn out very different than we expected. Life is unpredictable.

The same can be said for science. In the domain of particle physics, scientists have a name for this. They call it the "Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle." This means that no matter how fine our instruments, it is difficult to predict an atom's position and momentum with absolute precision. It may appear in one location only to

surprise you somewhere else. At the quantum level, things get even weirder. I recently had coffee with someone who has a background in physics (if you want to feel dumb, have coffee with a physicist!). He told me that not only can atoms take different paths than we expect, they can take different paths *at the same time*. In other words, even the most basic ingredients of existence—atoms—are defined by unpredictability.

Uncertainty lies at the heart of the universe.

How's that for a boost of confidence? It's not really. But track with me here, because this is leading somewhere, and it raises all kinds of interesting questions about the world and our place in it. At the top of that list is *why*? Why is the universe this way? Why are there so many barriers to our knowledge? Why would God make a world with so many unknowns?

Well, to help us understand, let's go to the book of Genesis, where it all began.



The opening verses of the Bible begin with the radical assertion that God exists: "In the beginning God . . ." (Genesis 1:1).

But what kind of God is he? Theologians and philosophers have grappled with this question for millennia, and there is a dizzying array of ideas and perspectives. But where most agree is that God, by definition, possesses the following attributes: he is omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), omnipresent (everywhere at once), and eternal. In other words, he is a limitless God. Incalculable. Unrestricted. Nothing is beyond his grasp.

When my daughter was three, I once asked her, "What is God like?"

With a smile, she threw her arms out wide and gushed, “He is *sooo* big!” And in that answer, she basically summarized everything we could ever learn or read about God.

He is *big*. Beyond anything we could ever imagine. And at the dawn of all things, this big God created us.

Let that sink in.

An incomprehensibly infinite God created something. Like an artist standing before a canvas, he splashed boundless layers of color, life, beauty, fire, water, earth—and our world was born.

“And God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:10).

Seven times in the creation story, God called his world good. He made the mountains, rivers, and seas and said, “It is good.” He made the stars, planets, and the sun and said, “It is good.” He made poetry, art, and pour-over coffee and said, “It is *very* good.” The word *good* in Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, is טוב (pronounced “tove”). It means creation the way it was meant to be. Joy, beauty, virtue, flourishing, harmony—all are enveloped in this ancient understanding of goodness. When God spoke, the universe was vibrant and alive, humming with his presence.

But here’s what’s fascinating: the one word that isn’t used to describe this new creation is *perfect*. That word doesn’t show up until Genesis 6, and there it’s used in a very different context. Why is this important? Because it means that from the very beginning, limitations were built into the system. It was good, but not perfect.

And maybe it *had* to be that way. After all, God, who is perfect, created the universe. But the universe is not God (pantheism), so when God created it, by definition, it was something less than God. The very act of creation was the initiation of limits. Look again at the first words of Genesis:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”



Here we see the basic ingredients of our universe: time (in the beginning), space (the heavens), and matter (the earth). In other words, an eternal God made a world limited by time. An immeasurable God made a world with the boundaries of space. An immaterial God made a world restricted by matter. Limitations were part of his design.

And he didn't stop there:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (Genesis 1:26)

God made the first humans. He began with Adam, then he created Eve. Someone once joked that God took one look at man, said, "I can do better than that," and then created woman! That's probably true, but whatever the reason, he made both *in his image*. What does that mean? It means that your life, in profound and mysterious ways, reflects the life of God. Art offers a glimpse of the artist. A poem is an echo of the poet's mind. You are the masterpiece of God. Like God, you are creative, intelligent, spiritual, relational, and beautiful. *Imago Dei*: in his image. No wonder God said, "It is good."

And yet, like the rest of creation, God made us with limits. Yes, we were formed in his image, but we don't have his divine essence. We're like God, but we're not God. I recently saw a new translation of Genesis inspired by Kanye West called *The Book of Yeezus*. In every place where the word *God* would have been is the word *Kanye*. Whoever made this may have taken Kanye's song "I Am a God" too literally, but I don't think even Kanye could create something from nothing!

And that's the remarkable thing about the creation story: a spiritual being created physicality, and then he placed us in it.

"Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man" (Genesis 2:8).

The word *Eden* in Hebrew (עֵדֵן) means "delight." It was a place of unparalleled beauty, pulsating with the radiance of God. He spoke, and the earth twisted in life, plants stretched out their leaves, trees lifted their branches to the sky. He embellished the garden with flowers. He adorned the heavens with stars and filled the sea with fish. The seventeenth-century poet John Milton described Eden as a "delicious paradise."<sup>2</sup> Not quite heaven but the closest thing yet.

Still, as good as this garden was, it had very real limits. There were physical limits: boundaries and barriers that defined its location in the world. There were limits of time: the sun rose and set, days turned into weeks, months, years. There were moral limits: the garden was virtually sin-free, except for a talking snake (where did *he* come from?). There were also limits to human freedom: Adam and Eve could eat anything—except for the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In a world of *yeses* there was only one *no*.

But—and here's the point—there still was a no. There were limits—boundaries, restrictions, and barriers. It was good, but it wasn't perfect.



So what does all of this mean? And what on earth does it have to do with a book on doubt?

Everything.

Because we live in a world of limits, we doubt.

Because we don't have all the answers, questions naturally arise:

*What is God like? How can I know him? What is life's purpose? Which way should I go?*

An anonymous fourteenth-century mystic once said that we find ourselves "in a cloud of unknowing." That is why we doubt. We don't always see the sky.

However, what we have to be reminded of here is that all of this was part of God's design. He purposefully made it like this. He built limits into the system. It wasn't an accident. He knew we would have to live with so many unknowns. And yet he chose for the human story to look this way. Author Ronald Rolheiser wrote, "Every choice is a thousand renunciations. To choose one thing is to turn one's back on many others."<sup>3</sup> When God decided to create, he could have said yes to a thousand other possibilities. But he didn't. He chose this world. He chose you. He chose me. Limits and all. And still, he called it "good."

All of this means that doubts are normal.

They're a natural consequence of living in this world.

You doubt not because you're a terrible person or because you're less spiritual than everyone else. You doubt because you're human.

This is important, because so many Christians view doubt as if it were an unspeakable, repulsive sin. I once saw a television interview where a well-known pastor was asked whether he ever doubted. He looked horrified, as if he had just been asked if he enjoyed chain-smoking and late-night binging on marijuana brownies. "Of course not!" he retorted. In his view doubt represented a flaw of character or an in-your-face rebellion against God.

Why do people think this way?

One reason is related to our cultural obsession with certainty.

We want to know everything, all the time. We map the world with GPS because we want to see where everything is. We seek answers on Yelp because we want assurance the food is good. Every second we ask Google forty thousand questions globally.<sup>4</sup> Easy answers are just a few taps away. And, for the most part, we love it. We've tasted the tree of knowledge, and we keep coming back for more.

But this can be toxic for our faith. If all we care about is certainty, we lose the beauty of mystery. If all we value is explanation, we lose the joy of exploration. Deep faith is about progress, not perfection. But a glance at Christian subculture reveals what we prefer: our bookstores are stacked with resources that accentuate quick answers and easily memorized proofs. Our songs are replete with affirmations. Even our sermons are neatly structured models of industry: three didactic points, all beginning with the letter *p*. The benefit of this kind of Christianity is that all the work is already done for you. Just sign on the line and never worry about faith again. It's all highly structured and systematized; certainty has become the blueprint for our faith. No wonder Christians who draw outside the lines feel so unloved.

Another reason has to do with the way we've read (or misread) Genesis. Sadly, many have used the opening chapters of the Bible as a pretext to shame those who question their faith. We've literally demonized doubt. How so? Well, if you skip Genesis 1 and your starting point is Genesis 3, then doubt is a satanic lie, a catastrophic byproduct of the fall. I can't tell you how many sermons I've heard and books I've read that suggest doubt is somehow our fault: "Doubt came into the world the moment Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit." "Doubt is always a sin." "Doubt reveals that something is wrong with your character." The solution? Confess the sin of doubt and "just believe." Doubt ought to be repressed

and denied. Push it back into the shadows. Anesthetize it with more church gatherings, songs, sermons, and statements of faith.

The downside to this, of course, is that suppressed doubt has a propensity to reemerge, often in a form far more volatile than before. And if that's the narrative we believe, should we be surprised when Christians who struggle with doubt feel they have no place in church? Should we be shocked when the questions they've concealed for years suddenly materialize and they announce on Snapchat that they're walking away from their faith?

The fall of humanity is a vital element of the Genesis story, but it must be interpreted in light of chapter 1. Starting there, not three pages in, reveals that doubt is part of the package. God didn't create Adam and Eve with all the answers to life's hardest questions. Instead, he allowed space for them to explore, question, and learn. He cultivated a garden in which mystery could coexist alongside faith. This means that when we doubt, God isn't disappointed with us; he understands. Doubt is a natural response to the limitations of our knowledge.

I'm not saying we should be content with our doubt or not make every effort to mature in our faith. Nor am I saying all forms of doubt are good. In fact, maybe as a reaction to incomplete and judgmental attitudes toward doubt, some run the opposite way and give up on their faith entirely. They look back on their faith and ridicule what they used to believe, and then look down on those who still have traditional understandings of faith, assuming they're standing in the way of progress.

Deconstruction can be healthy, and sometimes even crucial for genuine faith to emerge, but it can only take you so far. Any two-year-old can tear up a room. The real challenge is having convictions strong enough to live by.

Not all expressions of doubt are healthy. Not all doubt is worth holding onto.

But doubt itself is normal.

We need to stop vilifying those who live in the tension of conflicted faith. Doubt isn't a malevolent demon that we need to exorcise out of our brothers and sisters with sanctimonious words. It's part of their story. It's part of my story. Jude 22 says, "Be merciful to those who doubt."

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This, of course, brings us back to the question *why?* Why would God make the world this way? Why would he create us knowing we would experience doubt? Those are loaded questions. And perhaps Socrates had the best response: "I am ignorant of what I do not know." But let me offer a suggestion: What if God made the world like this to push us to deeper faith?

Frederick Buechner wrote, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."<sup>5</sup> I love that. Doubts can amplify our thirst for truth. For reality. They're a doorway to intimacy. Doubts aren't just an obstacle; they're an opportunity. Uncertainty can lead us into the beautiful mystery we call God.

Jesus said the Spirit of God is like a wind that blows where it wishes (John 3:8). Wind can be gentle and healing, like a peaceful breeze on a summer's day. Wind can also be a Category-5 hurricane that bulldozes everything in its path. David once said that God is our rest (Psalm 62:5). True, but he can also be the source of our distress. He is the answer, but he is also the question. He welcomes us home, then blows the house down. He is unconventional, unpredictable, unrestrained, wild—and he has a particular disdain

for boxes. In fact, the last time someone put him in one, he broke out three days later.

Because God is always on the move, then it follows that our faith will be too. The story is told of Augustine, the brilliant fourth-century theologian, who was once walking along the beach lost in thought. He was attempting to wrap his mind around a theological question. He then saw a boy scurrying back and forth, carrying a seashell of water, emptying it into a hole he had dug in the sand. Augustine asked what he was doing. The boy told him: he was transporting the entire sea into the hole. Augustine laughed. That's impossible! But then he realized that's what he had been trying to do with God.

Just when we think we've got God figured out, he vanishes. The more of him we let into our lives, the faster he soaks through the limits of our understanding. And that's why faith isn't about getting God to fit into our holes in the sand; it's about running to him. He calls us not to the shore, but the ocean. He invites us to move past our fear and into his heart, deeper and deeper, until we experience his presence around us and in us.

Faith isn't about containment, it's about possibility. Faith is skin-on-skin closeness, affinity, relationship. But to get there, sometimes our certainties need to be shattered. Our formulas disrupted. Our questions unanswered. And it's there, in the depths of relationship, that we encounter not a list of religious clichés, but a person. Friendship is born.

My wife Elyssa and I first met in the lobby of a church in the tiny town of Ruch, Oregon. Marriage has been an incredible ride. As we've done life together, I've learned a ton about who she is. I know her tastes, interests, hopes, anxieties, and (mostly!) can predict her moods. She used to be a cat person, but then we got a

goldendoodle and she turned from the dark side. She likes flowers and nature and interior design. She's a morning person, loves to paint, and is extroverted until she spends time with people. She's kind, funny, and inexplicably loves sweet potatoes. She's an amazing woman, and I married way out of my league.

What I love about our relationship is that, although I know so much about her, there is still so much I'm learning. There are aspects to her story I'm just beginning to appreciate, glimpses of her personality that astonish me, ways she sees the world that I don't expect. In so many ways, she is still an enigma to me.

Now, because I haven't figured her out, should I be alarmed? Should I worry that the relationship is unhealthy or broken? Do we need counseling? That's one way of looking at it. Another perspective is that the ambiguity in our relationship is actually a sign of health, passion, and a friendship that is moving forward. Certainty can restrict love. But subtlety gives it room to flourish.

Consider beauty. Something is truly sublime when it takes you by surprise. You catch your breath and you can't take your eyes away; you didn't see it coming. Or think about humor. Wit is the art of verbalizing the unexpected. You laugh because it's not anticipated.

Unknowns are what make life so unspeakably rich, iridescent, and engaging.

If I literally knew everything about my wife—every thought, insight, emotion, move, and placement of every atom—not only would that be slightly creepy, but it would also hinder the progression of love. For example, why ask her questions if I already know the answer? What is there to learn? Why seek her if she's already been found? It's because I *don't* know everything that the relationship feels so alive. There are secrets waiting to be unearthed.



Questions aching to be asked. Dimensions of her I have yet to fully explore or understand. It's the pursuit of love that leads to the discovery of love.

Mystery is the lifeblood of intimacy.

The same thing is true in our relationship with God.

What if God intentionally created a world in which doubt exists because he knew it would open the door to lasting, authentic love? What if God designed it in such a way—seeing “through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12 KJV)—so we would ache to see him face-to-face? What if the meaning is in the longing? It's easy to love God when he seems so close; but true love is the pursuit of love. The desire for his presence pushes us to greater depths.

If God is infinite, then there are infinite dimensions about him to discover. Which means all it takes is a little obscurity, combined with curiosity, and the journey of faith begins.

Which brings us back to Genesis.

When God first spoke into the darkness, boundaries, limits, questions, and doubts came to be. That's the world we live in. But here's the interesting bit: God also made us curious. He built margins into the fabric of existence, but he also gave us an insatiable thirst to experience what lies beyond. He gave us a yearning for adventure, a passion to grow, a longing to explore. We were made to be pilgrims, not campers. A camper is content to stay in one location. A pilgrim, however, keeps moving, keeps breaking new ground, relentlessly chases unfamiliar terrain, and won't stop seeking new things.

I've always been intrigued by Genesis 2:19, which says God brought the animals “to the man to see what he would name them.” What's surprising about this verse is that Adam was given

complete freedom to identify, interact with, and study the natural world. God didn't give him a rigid set of instructions telling him how to label an iguana or giraffe. No, he gave Adam space to think, design, and create. Curiosity drove Adam's engagement with the complexity and miracle of life. And I can't help but wonder, was God curious too? The verse says he wanted to see what Adam would come up with!

The point is, curiosity is a gift from God. Curiosity, along with mystery, lies at the heart of creation. Curiosity pounds at the door of imagination. It fuels creativity, spiritual renewal, depth in relationships, scientific innovations, and the pursuit of truth. Curiosity gives birth to worship. Albert Einstein affirms,

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead—his eyes are closed. This insight into the mystery of life . . . is at the center of true religiousness.<sup>6</sup>

That is what God invites us to step into. Celebrate mystery. Dance with curiosity. Resist the status quo. You're a pilgrim; explore. It is better to encounter God on the threshold of risk than to lose him in the comfort of mediocrity. Probe, wrestle, pursue, inquire. Ask the questions no one is willing to ask.

Perhaps you'll find out something new. Or maybe the answer will sound something like "big-fala hut, big-fala rat." But either way, you're still sitting around the fire. With friends. Laughing. Growing. Learning. Being surprised.

And that is what trust, and faith, is all about.